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WHILE I REMEMBER

SAVIOURS OF SOCIETY

COMPUTRIZED

SAVIOURS OF SOCIETY

BEING THE FIRST PART OF 'THE REALISTS'

BY

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TO

CAMPBELL STUART

" I could . . . bid courier take
Message for me, post-haste, a thousand miles.
I bid him, since I have the right to bid,
And, my part done so far, his part begins ;
He starts with due equipment, will and power,
Means he may use, misuse, not use at all,
At his discretion, at his peril too.
I leave him to himself : but, journey done,
I count the minutes, call for the result
In quickness and the courier quality,
Weigh its worth, and then punish or reward
According to proved service ; not before.
Meantime, he sleeps through noontide, rides till dawn,
Sticks to the straight road, tries the crooked path,
Measures and manages resource, trusts, doubts
Advisers by the wayside, does his best
At his discretion, lags or launches forth
(He knows and I know) at his peril too.
You see ? Exactly thus men stand to God :
I with my courier, God with me . . ."

ROBERT BROWNING :
Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau,
Saviour of Society.

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THE novelist who treats of contemporary social life exposes himself to the double penalty of being told that he has taken known models and that photography is not among the highest forms of art. It is usually waste of space for his publishers to announce that no living person is " intended " ; it is usually waste of time for him to agree with his critics that to create is at once more exacting and less unsatisfying than to copy ; and it is always waste of hope, when contemporary social life merges with contemporary political life, for the novelist to fancy that his protestations will be heard. If his secretary of state be a nobleman of wide territorial influence, with an hereditary interest in the turf, he must clearly be " intended " for Lord Derby. The newspaper-proprietor of modern romance must always be Lord Northcliffe, unless fashion favour Lord Rothermere or Lord Beaverbrook. The great hostess, the great wire-puller, the great financier, all have their inevitable " originals", at least in the imagination of certain readers.

The three volumes of *The Realists* were completed, in their first draft, before the fall of Mr. Ramsay Macdonald's government in the autumn of 1924 ; and, as that government is presumed to have fallen some months before the events described in the first chapter of the first volume, the political history that follows and the men and women who helped to shape it are alike imaginary. The author believes that, as the old liberal and Irish parliamentary leaders withdrew from the middle of the arena, a new grouping, a new faith, new methods and new men came to fill the place of the old.

As he believes and as the title suggests, an age of realism has supervened on the insincerities, the reticences and the sentimentalities in which politics were swathed before, during and immediately after the war. In throwing the action a few months or years forward, he has not essayed the part of a prophet, but has only tried to secure himself against the identity-hunter in a study of forces, personalities and atmosphere that seem characteristic of the age.

PART I

PROLOGUE

> "This constitutes my mission—grant the phrase—
> Namely, to rule men—men within my reach,
> To order, influence and dispose them so
> As render solid and stabilify
> Mankind in particles, the light and loose,
> For their good and my pleasure in the act."
> ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society.*

I

THROUGHOUT Fleet Street, long skilled in charming excitement from nothing and in wringing the last thrill from excitement already created, it was agreed that only a master-hand could have made history out of a royal commission in embryo and a revolution out of a yet unwritten report.

The official announcement, published on a Tuesday when newspaper-readers had recovered from the distractions of the week-end, stated baldly that the king, on the advice of the prime minister, had been graciously pleased to appoint a commission with power to call witnesses, take evidence, issue a report and make recommendations on the condition of trade and communications within the empire, having special regard to the state of unemployment in England, the desirability of fostering emigration and the possibility of establishing new markets in place of those which had been lost through the war.

Newspaper-readers accustomed to royal commissions opined that the new prime minister, like his predecessors, could find no remedy for unemployment and debated drearily whether any government, in these days of the world's convalescence after war, could discover a solution of anything. From the noontide of Mr. Lloyd-George to the twilight of Mr. Standish no one seemed able to reduce the cost of living nor to set trade on its feet; in one industry after another the combined statesmanship of masters and men could achieve no settlement more lasting then a year's agreement terminable by a strike or lock-out. The war had not ended war; the world had not been made safe for democracy or any other form of government; and commissions of enquiry were now accepted as a legitimate means of procrastination in which all parties might indulge equally in their equal and common duty of keeping the public quiet. Already, at short intervals, one ministry after another, by referring to a committee the still unsolved problems of departmental extravagance, food-prices and coal-control, had confessed its impotence to govern; Mr. Standish's contribution to the long tale of general failure was the royal commission on unemployment.

On the Thursday after the official announcement, when newspaper-readers were meeting in clubs and restaurants for the last time before abandoning themselves to the distractions of the week-end, an unofficial statement, originating in the Sheridan press, hinted at the possibility of Mr. Ambrose Sheridan's being invited to preside over the commission; and, without waiting to verify the report, twenty-seven public bodies, ranging from a distress committee in South London to a chamber of commerce in the West Riding, sent telegrams of congratulations and good wishes. Next morning the rumour was confirmed officially. The late London editions added that Mr. Sheridan had accepted the prime minister's invitation. The evening papers published the names of

Mr. Sheridan's colleagues. At their leisure during the week-end, neswpaper-readers learned that Mr. Sheridan, characteristically practical, was taking his mission round the world on a voyage of investigation; characteristically prompt and energetic, he was setting out the moment that a suitable ship could be found.

Newspaper-readers, however bitterly accustomed to royal commissions, opined now that, with Ambrose Sheridan in the chair, something might really come of this one. The problem of unemployment might, after all, prove not to be insoluble. Mr. Sheridan's report would be revolutionary. This royal commission, they asseverated, was in a fair way to make history. Newspaper-readers, whatever else they discussed that week-end, came back at short intervals to the trade commission and to Ambrose Sheridan, echoing with an air of originality the phrases which they had learned from Fleet Street and which Fleet Street had been taught by Sheridan himself.

II

"BUSINESS; and a business-man to do it," was the satisfied comment of the politicians in railway-carriages on their way home for the week-end.

Before he entered the House of Commons, Sheridan had covered the United Kingdom with a network of newspapers that catered indifferently, night and morning, or once a week, or once a month, for reactionaries and revolutionaries, churchmen and nonconformists, the followers of league-football and the leaders of the Anti-betting League; before he was in a position to found or buy newspapers he had covered the world of buyers and sellers with a network of exchanges at which, with little exaggeration, he would buy whatever any one had to sell and sell whatever any one wished to buy. As an employer and producer, he stood to lose more than most by unemployment and short production; as a rich man, he was hit more severely than most by oppressive taxation. That, it was generally conceded, stood to reason.

"If he can't get us out of the present mess, nobody can," predicted those of the railway-carriage politicians who regarded politics as a chaos where one man made havoc and another repaired it, but a chaos which prudent citizens, with an eye to an undisturbed week-end, left alone. "He's not afraid of work."

"And he's not afraid of plain speaking," affirmed those who deplored the vulgarity of politics, but remembered that Sheridan had taken charge of war-debts when no one else had the courage to call the French "a nation of fraudulent shop-keepers". He had taken charge of reparations when there was a danger that Germany would be let off too lightly. He had taken charge of the peace-treaty when America tried to atone for coming late into the war by slipping out of it early. Before that, he had never been afraid to speak his mind about the waste of public money, about "profiteering", about munitions and food and the unequal pressure of compulsory service. "If he'd had his way, you might have seen a business-government by now."

"That wouldn't suit the professional politicians," replied those of Sheridan's readers who had learned that he was refused office by liberal, labour and conservative prime ministers in turn for fear of the revolution that would follow a business man's invasion of professional politics.

Without question, the news of Sheridan's appointment was received with less and less cordiality as the discussion passed from those who followed him on paper to those who refused to follow him in the House. Sir Hyde Masterman, lunching at the Liberal Club, enquired of his companions what they thought of "Napoleon's" latest move. In liberal circles it was not forgotten that Ambrose

Sheridan had once been the rising hope of stern, unbending radicals. When the war came, however, he had joined a "ginger group" and helped to split the party. Not content with deserting the Asquith section, he had later left the Lloyd-George section and headed the secession to labour. Later still he had turned on his new friends. Now he was flirting with the tories.

"Imperial trade commission!" snorted Sir Hyde Masterman. "Imperial trade bunkum! He'll say that a tariff is the only hope for imperial trade; and the tories will be so pleased to hear this from an old free-trader that they'll take him to their bosom. What *I* should like to know is how you can protect the man here with a tariff and at the same time help the man in the colonies with a preference. . . ."

Mr. Samson, joint-leader of a vanished party, declared that the country would not take food-taxes from Sheridan or anybody else. For the rest, he rejoiced in the appointment: for so many years Ambrose Sheridan had been putting other people right that he should be given a chance of demonstrating his superior wisdom.

"Northcliffe ceased to count," he recalled, "from the day he was made to shoulder responsibility. It will be the same with Sheridan. Don't you agree, Ebbstone?"

Mr. Ebbstone, who, as Eppstein, had helped to finance the liberal party so long as it was a fount of honour, shrugged his shoulders without answering for the moment. He had devoted his time of late to buying British industrials, which were rising already. Whatever came of Sheridan's mission, it was reviving confidence.

"Ve can vish the tories luck of him," he decided at last. "*Ve* vouldn't 'ave 'im. Labour vouldn't 'ave 'im. 'Vonder vich'll be sorrier in the long run: tories for takin' 'im or socialists for turnin' 'im down?"

In labour circles, criticism was less articulate and more vindictive. When the first labour administration was formed, Sheridan met it with his blessing and pursued it with his advice. As "an old parliamentary hand", as "a man with a flair", as "a realist where politics are concerned", he informed the labour leaders that they might hold office for twenty years if they created a belief that they alone could prevent industrial disputes and that they alone could persuade their followers to work longer hours for smaller wages. "You must square the unions," he preached; and, when ministers could not or would not follow his counsel, he attacked them with a persistence that wore down their meagre strength and wore out their frail popularity. When their government fell, whatever the official, party explanation, Mr. Acland and Mr. Jukes, Mr. Fenn and Mr. Pomfret knew that they had Ambrose Sheridan to thank for their defeat and that he had pilloried them before the world as amiable incompetents. When Mr. Standish formed his new government, their sole consolation was that no place had been found for Sheridan. And now it seemed that he had only been left out because he was being kept for higher things.

"If he thinks he can cure unemployment by lowering the standard of living . . ." spluttered Acland at an informal meeting of the labour party's old "inner cabinet".

"Or by raising the cost," fumed Pomfret.

"Or by rooting people up from their homes and shipping them to the other end of the world. . . ."

In the Beaconsfield Club, official conservatism of the rank and file was divided and perplexed. As Mr. Standish had made this appointment, he must be supported in public; and it was reasonable to hope that Sheridan had sown his political wild oats and was beginning to realize that, as an employer of labour, a mouthpiece of opinion, a man with a stake in the country, his place was with the party of order. At the same time, his radical flouts and abour jeers at the party of order were too recent to be lightly forgotten. If his apparent divorce from bolshevism proved to be only a separation, due to some passing tiff, conservatives would have cheapened themselves by courting him as heart-whole and fancy-free.

" What's he up to now ? " whispered Mr. Tracy-Tracy, the London chairman of the National Conservative Federation.

" I know nothing officially," answered Mr. Pilgrim, his chief of staff. " It looks like a move to nobble the Sheridan press. And high time too ! His attacks are doing us a lot of harm."

" It's a pity he wasn't given office at the beginning. After all, we owe it to him that we are where we are."

" Better late than never."

" But is the commission going to satisfy him ? " enquired Tracy-Tracy in patent doubt.

Conservatism of the rank and file became deferentially silent at the approach of a minister. Mr. Kenneth Doyle, the parliamentary undersecretary to the Colonial Office, made a practice of drifting through the political clubs when there was gossip to be collected for his chief or a new word to be taught the parrots of the party. For two days and a night the Beaconsfield Club had been discussing the new royal commission ; and Lord Orpington had sent him to find what backing Sheridan enjoyed apart from his papers.

" How is the announcement being received ? " asked Doyle of the party managers.

" He's the best man you could find," answered Tracy-Tracy with caution. " That's a feather in the prime minister's cap. Whether Sheridan or any one can *do* anything. . . ."

" If he can't, he must keep his mouth shut," said Doyle.

" If he *can*, he'll be able to ask for his own reward. I don't know that I want to see him in the cabinet."

" Well, you won't, for six months," said Doyle.

Proceeding to the Colonial Office he found the secretary of state in high good-humour.

"I never thought he'd take the fly, Kenneth," Lord Orpington confessed. "What are people saying?"

"They don't quite know what to make of it," Doyle answered. "They don't look forward much. The heads of departments here are pleased: they feel they'll have six months' respite from attack. I met Carmichael coming out of the War Office. He and Ferrers are delighted, naturally. They know he'll over-reach himself. . . ."

"'*Capax imperii nisi imperasset*'," Lord Orpington quoted. "By the time Sheridan comes back, I don't think any one will press to have him taken into the cabinet. I'd throw down the same challenge to the others if they took it into their heads to attack us. Rothermere. Beaverbrook. 'Do the job yourself,' I'd say, 'if you think you can do it better. If you can't do it better, don't criticize people who are doing their best.' They're too sharp to be caught that way, though. I'm only surprised that Sheridan walked into the trap."

"The only thing I'm afraid of with these damned newspaper-fellows," said Doyle, "is that they'll lie their way to success. You and I know that Sheridan's taken on an impossible job, but, if he dresses his window carefully, he may hide the fact that he's failed. The last word is always with the press. Once a lie gets started, you can't overtake it."

"Figures will overtake most lies if they're the kind of figures that people notice. In effect, Sheridan is undertaking to cure unemployment. If the figures of unemployment remain unchanged, no amount of lying will drive the unemployment out of sight or make Sheridan's mission a success."

"Conversely, if the figures fall, he gets the credit of it."

"That's what the P.M.'s afraid of," confessed Lord

Orpington with a frown. " I told him to risk it. You lunching at Nugent's? Come along."

III

At Nugent's Club, in St. James' Street, the royal commission was placed in its proper perspective from the standpoint of men who observed politics at closer quarters than the man in the railway-carriage, the man in the defeated enemy's camp or the man in the swarming political club.

" You've earned the gratitude of the party and of the country," exclaimed the foreign secretary, as Lord Orpington came into the coffee-room. " The country and the party, I *should* say," he corrected himself.

" It comes to the same thing, doesn't it ? " Doyle muttered.

Though Sir John Ferrers deplored the intrusion of party-spirit into foreign policy and was always careful in his public utterances to put country before party, he was unshakably convinced that his country was best served by his party's being in power. So thinking, he spared neither strength nor money to put it in power and to keep it in power; and, realizing that decay within was more to be feared than attack from without, he left the details of foreign policy to his permanent officials and employed his resultant leisure in purging and bracing the body of the party.

" Beyond telling the P.M. that I couldn't carry on if I was going to be attacked day in, day out, I've done nothing," Lord Orpington declared. " I don't think we're any of us anxious to have Sheridan as a colleague. . . ."

" I was afraid the P.M. would propose it again, simply for peace and quiet," said Sir John with a frown.

From Mr. Standish, as the foreign secretary knew better than most, little discrimination and less decision could be expected: the prime minister was altogether too tolerant and would accept the allegiance of men who could repeat but a single sentence of the party creed. That way, Sir John knew, lay ultimate disruption. Had he been entrusted with the formation of the government, he would have allowed no free-thinking on foreign policy or Ireland or the established church or the House of Lords; nor would he have admitted heretics on Mr. Standish's feeble plea that they would have no chance of airing their heresies. When heretics yielded place to open blasphemers, when the prime minister talked of strengthening the ministry by inviting Ambrose Sheridan to join it, Sir John Ferrers judged that the time had come for him to save the party; and with Mr. Rodney and Mr. Carmichael he had formed a triumvirate pledged to leave Foreign Office, Admiralty and War Office without a master on the day that Sheridan was taken into the cabinet. In the shadow of the triumvirate lurked a bigger and less distinguished group bound by oath to refuse office if the triumvirate resigned.

" We have you to thank," Sir John told Lord Orpington, " for the present ingenious alternative. I think our friend has dished himself."

" I'm so sure of it that I can't make out what he's thinking of," answered Lord Orpington. " The credit of the idea, though, must go to Charles Otway. I was grousing to him about the way Sheridan's papers always go for me; and Charles suggested I should take him at his word and let him shew what *he* could do. I didn't think he'd fall for it, but there's no limit to some people's vanity. He really believes his own papers when they compare him to Napoleon. Well, he asked for my help; and I promised it. He shall have all the rope he needs. If he doesn't hang himself, we shall at least have six months' holiday from him. . . ."

" Awkward for you, Peter," interrupted Mr. Rodney, with a grin, " if Sheridan *does* make a sensible suggestion."

" I shall adopt it ! " answered Lord Orpington. " Good Heavens, I'm not prejudiced against the fellow to *that* extent ! Personal feelings, party feelings. . . . We should forget them very quickly if Sheridan or any one else came forward with a cure for unemployment. . . ."

" Would *he* forget them as quickly ? " persisted Mr. Rodney. " We're all assuming that Sheridan fails, he's being sent out to fail ; if he succeeded in a task where every one—to speak quite frankly—has failed already, wouldn't he have the laugh of us ? Shouldn't we find it rather difficult to resist him ? "

Sir John Ferrers took it upon himself to answer for the cabinet. Sheridan had been refused office in the past and would be refused it in the future, not through his own personal unpopularity, not through the antagonism of this man or that, whom he had attacked in his papers, but as the considered policy of the party. Never again would conservatives enter a coalition nor accept the leadership of their political opponents. Their task was to conserve ; and the first thing to be conserved was their own identity. If Sheridan embraced their faith, he would be received on his merits and with due regard to his record in the days before his regeneration ; he must not try to play the part of a Chamberlain or a Lloyd-George, capturing or converting the party to his own uses.

" A great many people," Sir John explained, " thought it was personal spite when Carmichael and Rodney and I said we wouldn't sit in a cabinet with Sheridan. It was only self-preservation. The party *must* be kept homogeneous. I hammered that into the prime minister. I hammered it into the Carlton Club, with the result that you got the solemn league and covenant. Not Carmichael and I alone, but Killarney, Charles Otway, Avonmouth, Moncrieff, Denton warned the P.M. that he mustn't count on them. And, if he tried to take Sheridan in to-morrow, the same thing would happen :

we should resign in a body and there'd be no one to take our place. It will be time enough to offer Sheridan a welcome when he's made up his mind which side of the House he means to sit."

IV

In the dining-room of Number Ten, Downing Street, the news that Mr. Sheridan had accepted the prime minister's invitation was received by the prime minister with mixed feelings.

Better than all his critics and advisers, he knew that, unless he grappled with the problem of industrial reconstruction more successfully than his predecessors, his government would fall like theirs. The adroitness of one colleague in setting traps, the confidence of all the rest that Sheridan would walk into them seemed adroitness wasted and confidence misplaced. The cabinet might breathe more freely when its chief critic was discredited, but to defeat Ambrose Sheridan was not the same as to cure unemployment; and, in a way that Mr. Standish could never explain to his colleagues, he regarded himself less as the leader of a party than as the king's first minister and the head of a government responsible for the welfare of the country. His task would have been easier if Ferrers and Sheridan had never quarrelled, easier still if they had never been born; had he to choose between them he would have taken Sheridan for his brains and personality, but the triumvirate was in a position to split the party and the first breach in their ranks would let in an uncontrolled labour majority. To cure unemployment was less urgent, to Mr. Standish's thinking, than to keep labour out of office, but both were more important than a vendetta, however successful, with Ambrose Sheridan.

Perhaps, too, the vendetta would not be successful. It might be chance that British industrials should rise from the moment when Sheridan took official charge of unemployment ; on the other hand, it might be a result of autosuggestion among speculators. If they believed a stock would rise, if they said it would rise, if they bought for a rise, that stock would rise in fact. Sheridan had an undeniable flair. He was a master of mass-psychology. If he said there was a good time coming, if he urged every one to buy in anticipation of that good time, people would in fact buy. And, as the shops sent their new orders to the factories, as the factories sent new orders for raw material, the good time would in truth come, unemployment would fall, the Standish government would have succeeded where the Macdonald government, the Baldwin government, the Lloyd-George government had failed.

" Autosuggestion . . ." murmured the prime minister. The man who understood that understood the secret of government. Why did securities fall when radicals and labourites came into power ? Because every one was frightened, because every one said they would fall, because every one hastened to sell before they could fall too far. It was hard on radicals and labourites that they should always have " the City " against them, but that was the fortune of war.

" Well, you see I've taken your advice," Mr. Standish told Lord Otway. " And it's beginning to bear fruit already. The Sheridan press is changing its tone ; and there's an undoubted note of optimism in the air."

" I always said that you might do good, but that you couldn't possibly do harm," answered Lord Otway. " You've muzzled the Sheridan papers and got rid of Sheridan for six months. At the end he may have solved your difficulties for you ; or they may have solved themselves. If, unhappily, they remain unsolved, Sheridan will no longer be able to attack you for failing where he has failed too."

" But if he succeeds where every one else has failed ? "

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asked the prime minister. "I must take him into the government. If I take him in, Ferrers and Carmichael and Rodney will go out. If they go . . ."

"I shouldn't try to keep them," Lord Otway recommended. "They can't be allowed to impose perpetual excommunication on any man."

"They had me at their mercy when I was forming the government. I must find places for all three of them; they must choose their offices; and they must have a veto on my other appointments. If I didn't accept their terms, I might throw in my hand: no one would serve in their place. You yourself, Charles . . ." he continued in mild reproach.

"I felt very strongly that Sheridan was a danger," Lord Otway confessed. "I didn't know him then. Now that I know him I still think he's a danger; but he's more dangerous outside the government than in. If he comes back successful in six months' time, I think he should be taken into the cabinet. I, personally, should not join Ferrers in resisting him. Any influence I have would be used in breaking down the boycott which Ferrers has set up . . ."

"If they held to their threat of resigning, would you be prepared to fill a place?"

Lord Otway, taken off his guard by the abrupt question, hesitated long before answering. As a survivor from Mr. Balfour's government, he was formally offered a position in every conservative administration; and to each conservative prime minister he replied that, while his experience and advice could be commanded, he was reluctant to give up his directorships unless the public interest required it.

"If that were the only means of breaking the boycott," he promised with a sigh.

"You won't be popular with Ferrers or Peter Orpington, but I shall be master in my own house. At least . . ."

The prime minister smiled wanly. "If I have to take Sheridan in, I wonder if I shall ever be able to call my soul my own again."

V

IN Ambrose Sheridan's house, in his offices and in the houses and offices of those he employed, the trade commission was the only subject of conversation that week-end.

Max Hendry, telephoning from his father's house at Newmarket, angled to find out whether Mr. Sheridan expected his private secretary to accompany the mission in the middle of the flat-racing season, or whether his place could be taken by his friend Geoffrey Mallock, lent for that purpose by the Colonial Office.

Geoffrey Mallock took counsel of his friends to learn whether the mission would be "good for" a C.B. or whether he must be content with a C.M.G.

Mrs. Sheridan wondered if a complete change for six months would not really be the best thing for everybody. She wondered whether anything else would cure her husband of his infatuation for a girl half his age. She wondered whether it would be worse for her to be left behind, in suspense, or taken with him, to be reminded daily that their marriage had come to an end ten years ago and had better be ended formally. She did not wonder whether the mission would be a success, because she had never known her husband to fail. She did not wonder whether, at the end, he would be taken into the cabinet: he would enter the cabinet in his own good time. When she was not wondering about anything else, she wondered whether Ambrose still valued her judgement and whether she could make him see the imprudence of taking a girl like Evelyn Colthurst as his "personal" secretary.

Miss Colthurst wondered if Mrs. Sheridan ever wondered about anything.

Editors and leader-writers, secretaries and managers, typists and stenographers debated their chances of being taken with the mission.

Mr. Sheridan himself sent for his solicitor, Andrew Livingstone, and remained closeted with him for the whole of one day and the half of one night. At the end he handed Max Hendry a list of all who were coming and instructed him to give it to Lord Orpington, who wished to entertain the mission at a farewell dinner.

The public bodies that telegraphed their congratulations and good wishes had risen by now from twenty-seven to four hundred and nine.

VI

In the smoking-room of his house in Manchester Square Lord Otway let fall, in the middle of the week-end, that he had been lunching with the prime minister and that the Sheridan mission was likely to be abroad for at least six months.

By accident or design, he made his announcement a few minutes before dinner, when there was no time for anybody to say much. He made it to his wife, to his son and to his two elder daughters; his sons-in-law happened to be present, but at the mention of Sheridan's name they faded out of the half-circle round Lord Otway and became engrossed in illustrated papers. The family was left incomplete by the absence of the youngest daughter, though she could he heard overhead, humming a popular waltz as she dressed.

" The longer the better," commented Mrs. Wainwright. Her father glanced apprehensively towards the two young men half hidden by their illustrated papers. " It's all right: Philip knows."

" So does Guy," added Mrs. Cavaly. " Well, it's the best news I've had for a long time. If this hadn't happened, you really *would* have had to say something to Auriol, daddy."

"The trouble about saying anything . . ." began Lady Otway and ended without defining what the trouble was.

Guy Cavaly and Philip Wainwright, simultaneously laying aside their papers, supposed simultaneously that, if Sheridan was going abroad, he would be taking old Max with him. They wondered, to each other, how old Max would like being dragged away in the middle of the flat-racing season. They agreed that it was all in the day's work. As the family council shewed no signs of breaking up, they simultaneously pushed back the cuffs from their left wrists, looked at their watches and asked what the right time was. Each added that he had been afraid he was going to be late for dinner.

"To do Auriol justice," said Colin Otway, "I don't think she's altogether to blame. Sheridan's the fellow *I* want to talk to. With the toe of a boot, for choice. Auriol's too young . . ."

"She's not too young to know that some things are simply not done," interrupted Imogen Wainwright. "When it comes to living in the pocket of a man whose reputation with women is absolutely notorious . . ."

"His reputation wasn't bad enough to keep us from admitting him to the house," Colin reminded his sister.

"The thing had to be regularized somehow," answered Joyce Cavaly. "You couldn't have him visiting her at Cambridge, taking her out to dinner, being seen with her all over the place . . ."

"By asking him here, we've given our blessing to it," grumbled Colin.

From Auriol's room, overhead, came the sound of singing:

"*What'll I do*
When you
Are far away

And I
Am feeling
Blue?
What'll I do?"

"God!" murmured Colin as at an omen.

"It's a mistake to become too tragic," suggested Lady Otway. "I'm taking Auriol to Italy next week. Mr. Sheridan's going away for six months; and in that time anything may happen."

"But suppose for the sake of argument," said Imogen, "that nothing does?"

"If this business begins all over again in six months' time . . ." sighed Joyce.

"Aren't you thinking too much of Auriol and not enough of Sheridan?" asked Lord Otway. "When he comes back, he'll have had either a great success or a great failure. If he has had a great success, I don't see how Standish can help taking him into the cabinet. And, once he's there, he'll have to pay rather more attention to the *convenances* . . ."

"D'you think he *will* have a success, sir?" asked Guy Cavaly, grasping eagerly at the chance of breaking up the family council.

"I do," said Lord Otway.

"And, if he fails, he'll be a pricked bubble?" Colin enquired hopefully. "M' well . . ."

VII

By herself in her room, singing as she wrote, Auriol Otway made clear that she at least did not share her father's optimism.

"*I must see you at once,*" she wrote peremptorily to Mr. Sheridan. "*I think you must be mad.*"

CHAPTER I

The Sin For Which There is No Forgiveness

> " . . . 'Tis my nature, when I am at ease,
> Rather than idle out my life too long,
> To want to do a thing—to put a thought,
> Whether a great thought or a little one,
> Into an act, as nearly as may be.
> Make what is absolutely new—I can't,
> Mar what is made already well enough—
> I won't: but turn to best account the thing
> That's half-made—that I can."
>
> ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau,*
> *Saviour of Society.*

I

"*I must see you at once. I think you must be mad. Auriol.*"

Among the telegrams and letters that reached him on his appointment to the chair of the royal commission on trade and communications (now—after three days—more than eight thousand), only one omitted to compliment Mr. Sheridan on his public spirit or to congratulate the prime minister on his choice or to offer good wishes for the success of the mission.

"*I think you must be mad . . .*"

With a smile that the fulsome phrasing of his other letters had failed to evoke, Mr. Sheridan propped the terse note against an ink-stand and reached for his engagement-book.

"'*At once,*'" he muttered.

Auriol Otway wrote as she spoke: briefly, pertly, imperiously; springing to her feet in mid-sentence or flinging herself into the chair by her desk as though she was flinging herself on an opponent ; eager and insistent, a girl to whom nothing could ever be unimportant. Though Lady Otway sometimes protested sleepily : " Darling, it's not very polite to tell people they're mad if they happen to disagree with you," Sheridan could not resent a manner which shewed that the girl was at least interested in him.

And she was only proclaiming, with her delightful, protective candour, what Andrew Livingstone had mumbled with the arid caution of a lawyer, what his editors were muttering with the timidity of anxious dependents and what his brother-in-law, Tony Rushforth, reported every one to be saying in the political clubs. From the prime minister and the colonial secretary to the humblest leader-writer and dullest smoking-room oracle, every critic was convinced that the great Sheridan had over-reached himself. " In effect, he has undertaken to cure unemployment " was the phrase attributed to Lord Orpington. " To put it bluntly," added Rushforth, " they feel they've got rid of you for at least six months ; and they can't make out why you're taking the job." No doubt, like Auriol, they thought he must be mad.

Sheridan stripped the paper from a sketch that had been submitted by his chief cartoonist. With legs apart, head forward and locked hands, he saw himself on board ship, eastward-bound. Mr. Standish and Lord Orpington were speeding him on his way ; Sir John Ferrers and Mr. Carmichael were executing a dance of unseemly triumph behind his back. By his side, young, lean and invincible, the shade of Napoleon Buonaparte whispered, reminiscently of his own eastern campaign, " *They tried to get rid of me too.*" Attached to the drawing was a note from the artist : " *Query to editor. Is this pitching it too strong ? I think Mr. S. should approve.*" The editor contented himself with adding : " *Mr. Sheridan. To see.*" After long consideration Mr. Sheridan had scribbled : " *Seen* *and approved. S.*" He had wasted time in wondering whether his artist meant that Mr. Sheridan's approval should be obtained or that this was the kind of tribute that Mr. Sheridan could not help approving. It mattered little either way, but Cruikshank himself would have been turned into the street if he had thought fit to take liberties with his employer. Meanwhile, the cartoon was an effective answer to Auriol and any one else who thought that he had walked into a trap or that Orpington and his friends would be any more successful in getting rid of him than had been the Directors in getting rid of Buonaparte.

"*I must see you at once.*"

The imperious note demanded an answer; and, as he fidgeted with his engagement-book, Sheridan wondered if Auriol realized at all how difficult her family was making it for them to meet. First he was discouraged from visiting her at Cambridge; then she was taught to protest that she wasted his time whenever he took her out to dinner; and once, when he motored her into the country, her brother Colin had officiously attached himself to their party, explaining in a whisper which was meant to be overheard that Auriol would look rather foolish if any of her friends found her enjoying a clandestine *tête-à-tête*. The house in Manchester Square still offered a formal welcome, but Lady Otway's enquiries after Mrs. Sheridan, punctilious and pointed, were a hint that Mrs. Sheridan's husband might find a less formal welcome if he did not always come alone.

Sheridan concluded that he was not wanted. The Otways probably knew that he was no longer in love with his wife; and they were saying that Auriol needed protecting, as though he could have dreamed of entangling a girl in her position. They were telling each other, no doubt, that in a week's time he would be out of the way and she out of danger; meanwhile, if they opposed her clumsily, they might drive her into his arms.

When he came back, he would probably find that she had been hunted into a safe engagement with some man of her own class. The cordiality of the Otways would then be as sincere as in the days before he threatened their peace of mind ; and the man of her own class would take care that there were no middle-aged interlopers hanging about his wife on the plea of talking politics with her. To the Otways it must be inconceivable that Auriol could have an opinion or that any one would wish to hear it.

" Damned fools ! " Sheridan muttered angrily.

They could not see that Auriol was of a different clay from theirs, that her understanding and white-hot faith could inspire a man and that, with her beside him, he could move mountains. The Otways lacked neither character nor intelligence, but their values were rigid. In thirty years' time, still admitting that the face of the world had been made unrecognizable by war, they would still be trying to recreate a corner of England as they remembered it before the war. Instead of being put to earn their livings, the boys would still be sent from Eton into the army ; the girls would still be expected to marry men of a recognized social grade rather than men of achievement or promise. The family would still starve to retain an estate which could not be kept up ; and the shrewdness that had led the present Lord Otway to evade death-duties by handing Lokshott over to Colin in his life-time would doubtless find a means, thirty years later, of patching an edifice that should have been abandoned by the present Lord Otway's grandfather. Tenacious and sterile, they conceded that the world had changed, was changing, must always change, yet refused to change with it. And, when one of their number was too young to remember their way of life before the war, they treated her as a child, to be taught by time, to be ridiculed without malice and always to be protected.

These were the true conservatives, in a sense that a man of the Victorian era, like Standish, a man of the Regency, like Orpington, a party hack like Ferrers could never be conservative. It was the Otways who had to be overcome first if a new world was to be made in place of the one that had passed away in the war. And Auriol, an Otway of almost a different generation, an Otway in name only and by accident, realized that. When his head and heart were bruised with beating against their invertebrate self-satisfaction, Sheridan found in her some one to share and refresh his faith. Until this moment he had hardly considered how he would survive six months abroad without her passionate enthusiasm to inspire him ; and he had never considered how he would be able to dream or work when she vanished from his life on the arm of a Wainwright or a Cavaly, stereotyped, impeccable and wholly ineffectual.

Meanwhile, Auriol " must " see him. She claimed rights in him. Had he no rights in her ?

II

SHERIDAN took a turn up and down his workroom, observing—with more interest than he usually spared—the presses and files, the news-cutting albums and framed caricatures that recorded his progress from a sea-port slum round the ambit of the world to a mansion in Cleveland Row.

" '*They tried to get rid of me too,*' " he muttered, balancing the latest of the cartoons on the top of a bookcase. " I wonder if Auriol would care to have that when I've finished with it."

Whether she cared for it or not, she should have it. No better answer could be given to the question whether he had taken leave of his senses ; and the presence of the drawing in Manchester Square would be a challenge to the rigid values of the Otways. Instead of regarding him simply as an interloper, they might consider what manner of man he seemed to the world outside Manchester Square. The caricaturists saw him, as a rule, under a Napoleonic guise; a high proportion of the press-cuttings referred to his "Napoleon touch"; and an analysis of his own voluminous writings would have shewn him to be inspired by something that might be called a new Napoleonic idea. What Napoleon had done for France Sheridan wished to do for the union of British commonwealths. As Napoleon had ended the middle ages, he wished to end the nineteenth century. He was heir to the first world-war, as Napoleon had been heir to the first French revolution.

"Auriol's phrase," he recalled with vicarious pride.

She had used it at their first meeting, when she pushed young Hendry forward to introduce them and explained that she was yearning to meet him, that she had been reading his articles *After the War* and that there were a thousand questions she wanted to ask him. Before they parted, she had asked him the best part of a thousand, including one about Napoleon: what would he have done as a junior officer of artillery in the late war—and afterwards—if he had been on the German, French, British or American side? They had argued for an hour on this; and at some point Auriol had told Sheridan that, if he chose, he might be heir to the first world-war. How they had reached this turn of discussion he could not remember: he was too much intrigued by the girl's imaginary portrait of an American Buonaparte, too much startled by the range of her imagination, the wealth of her knowledge and the aptness of her parallels. Maybe he was a little intoxicated by the warmth of her admiration and by the detachment of her candour in discussing him as an already historical figure. "You and Napoleon . . ." she kept saying. "What you're doing, what Napoleon did. . . ." Setting out from the same obscurity, Napoleon had carved his way to power with the weapons of his time; in his hands war became a new art. The weapon of the century following was the press; in Sheridan's hands publicity had become a new science. Napoleon had given his youth to becoming the first soldier in France; Sheridan had given his to becoming one of the richest men in England. . . .

Had he ever, she was eager to know, followed up this parallel? If not, would he? Comparing the late war and its accompanying economic revolution with the first French revolution and its resultant wars, would he consider the astonishing number of points at which his career and Napoleon's ran on parallel lines? Sheridan listened as long as she would talk; when she had done, he added a point that had escaped her. Napoleon, to continue the parallel into domestic life, had married before he saw all that marriage involved. The historians wrote of his marriages censoriously or sentimentally, cynically or derisively, never as a matter of historical importance.

"I'd never thought of that," was Auriol's comment. "I believe you're right."

Turning from the familiar caricatures, Sheridan tried now to picture what his life would have been if he had not married. In the days when he hardly knew how to handle a knife and fork, Laura Rushforth had polished him. When he was friendless, she had introduced him to her own circle, the varied and socially instructive circle that her father had collected in Harley Street. When he was ill, she had nursed him; and, before he came to believe in his star, she had inspired him to pick himself up and start again after his early reverses. Laura had been useful, but she inspired him no longer. She had aged before him and in everything else lagged behind. There were no children, there was no hope of children; and, since her hold on him had slackened, he was driven to one furtive, mercenary union after another. Since their marriage came to an end ten years before, Sheridan found that romance, with all its excitement and loveliness, had faded out of his life. Laura was not even a companion. If he had not married her, he would now be free to marry some one else.

It was interesting to speculate how the Otways would have received him if he had been unencumbered. Would their concern for birth yield to their respect for achievement, when achievement was on this scale? Position, power and money, if only one had enough of it, were adequate substitute for a pedigree. Napoleon had been allowed to marry a Hapsburg; and Auriol was of an age and a generation to care nothing how a man was bred so long as he was a man. If, like Napoleon, one arranged a divorce, would the Otways still offer a welcome? Sheridan had never heard their views on divorce. Until that moment he had not been interested to hear them; but, when a marriage had in fact been at an end for ten years, it was a small matter to end it formally.

"*I think you must be mad.*"

Almost hearing her rippling, impetuous voice, Sheridan tried, not for the first time, to distinguish between Auriol's interest in him and her interest in his career. Was it conceivable that she too was wondering how she would survive the next six months? Was she at all interested in him apart from his career? Was she interested in any one? From her manner and conversation, Sheridan always felt that she had not yet learned the meaning of passion; he wondered what figure he would cut if she were asked to look on him as a man. Not since he was a boy of twenty had he tested his power over a girl of twenty.

The austere work-room spared no space for a mirror; and, on an impulse, Sheridan walked downstairs to the library, repeating the phrase which he himself had coined about "middle-aged interlopers". The most malicious of caricaturists at least never tried to stunt his frame or distort his features; and he knew, as he walked, that at forty-two he was carrying his six feet and sixteen stone erect. The mirror shewed him that his grey eyes were clear and steady. His black hair, smooth and straight, was thick as a boy's; his teeth were strong and white; his skin was ruddy and shining. No one would mistake him for anything but a grown and seasoned man, but, if girls of twenty cared for strength and condition, they would find them in the aquiline nose, the thin-lipped, tightly shut mouth and the powerful, out-thrust jaw, all firm flesh and hard bone. It was the face of a gladiator in training; and Sheridan patted his cheeks and fingered the back of his neck to be sure that all flabbiness and fat had been trained away. His appetite and capacity for food and drink demanded merciless exercise; and he had worn out a dynasty of secretaries before he found in Max Hendry an adequate pace-maker and trainer.

"Which reminds me!" Sheridan exclaimed.

Though young Hendry had telephoned during the week-end to know whether he was to accompany the mission, no answer had been given. Except as a trainer, the boy was not really wanted, but there would be no work for him to do at home and it would seem harsh if he were turned adrift for no fault of his own after twelve months' devoted service. By taking him, Sheridan would please Laura, who had known him since he was a child; he would please—and possibly surprise—the Otways, who seemed to think him rather inhuman for getting rid of people when they were no longer of use to him. Needless to say, Hendry was a friend, probably a cousin, of the Otways! Hearing that voice, recognizing that manner, seeing that Old Etonian tie, Sheridan felt that with nine such young men out of ten he would be safe in asking: "Are you not a friend of the Otways?" And instantly the reserve which they kept for interlopers would melt; they would be talking about "Muriel Otway" and

"Charles" and "old Colin" and "Auriol". If only to keep in Auriol's good graces, Sheridan wanted to treat Hendry well. From their manner to each other, he divined that these two were old friends or young lovers; and from Auriol's quick interest in vague hints of the positions to which the secretaryship might lead he surmised that Hendry's future was intertwined with her own. If the young man cherished the hope of marrying Auriol as soon as he had an assured income, it was easy to understand why he was so anxious to know whether he was to be taken away from her for six months.

"If it's any satisfaction to her . . ." Sheridan began, then paused to wonder why he should raise a finger to help the Otways if they were in fact saying that in a week's time he would be out of the way and Auriol out of danger.

If on his return he found that Auriol had been hunted into a safe engagement with Hendry or another of his kind, he must resign himself to losing her, but he was not obliged to help any one to end a friendship that at its lowest was innocent and at its highest an inspiration, an excitement, an intoxication such as he had not met for twenty years.

"*Captain Hendry. As I shall require you* . . ." he began to write, then laid his pen down and took another turn from his desk to the window.

III

AURIOL'S note—or the fancied echo of her voice—was disturbing him as it had never disturbed him before he realized that he was to lose sight of her for six months. His fingers twitched restlessly as he remembered the confiding pressure of her soft, strong little hands. It was intolerable to think that he would not see her wise young eyes and sudden, dazzling smile for six months, that he might return to find her married to one of the standardized, brainless boys, starched and oiled, who took her dancing.

"Though I've less to fear from Hendry than any one!"

He returned to his desk and tore up the unfinished note. There could be no thought of rivalry so long as he had a wife and Hendry could offer only an insecure four hundred a year, backed by day-dreams and conversational promises. And, the longer he idled in England on an income that was just big enough to stifle his ambition, the less likely would Hendry be to make a career for himself. The more, too, that Auriol saw of him as a member of the decorative unemployed, the less reason she would find for admiring him.

Sheridan glanced again at the curt, indignant note and telephoned to say that he was coming to see Auriol. On his way downstairs he knocked at his wife's door and told her that he would probably be out for luncheon. These minor courtesies had become rare of recent years, but, if she wanted to question him about the mission, she should have her chance. In general, Sheridan never volunteered information: the question "Why didn't you tell me?" could be most effectively countered by the question "Why didn't you ask me?" but he hoped now to make their meeting the occasion of exploring the thoughts that flashed behind her quick, nervous eyes and faltered before they reached her tremulous lips. "Cross-questions and crooked answers!" he sighed. For the last ten years, life had been made easier by her discretion in not opposing him wantonly, but he wished that she was less broken-spirited. He was fond of her in spite of his disappointment; he hated to see her flinch when he spoke. They might have been companions, they might even have been friends if she had realized frankly, instead of living in the past, that women faded and men wearied of them.

"I have to go out. Anything you want to say first?"

"Are you in a great hurry? This mission of yours . . ." Mrs. Sheridan began timidly.

Sheridan shut the door and threw himself into a chair.

"I couldn't say anything about it before, because it wasn't my secret," he explained. *The Times* was lying on the floor between them; and he read out the official statement with conspiratorial impressiveness. "*Now* . . ." he went on with an encouraging smile.

Mrs. Sheridan thanked him and cast about for innocuous questions, repeating the phrases which he had read. "*Expected to be away for at least six months* . . ." "*Canada, Australia, New Zealand* . . ."

"How many of you are going?" she asked at length.

"Between thirty and forty, I should think."

"And I . . . ?"

"You?"

"Do you want me?"

"It isn't a question of 'wanting.' If we all bring our wives, the party becomes unwieldy. If you make an exception for one, it's hard not to make an exception for others."

"But you're the head of the mission." Though he nodded, Mrs. Sheridan knew better than to press her point. "Who are you taking as your personal staff?" she asked.

"I'm not quite sure. Orpington is lending me one of his secretaries, Geoffrey Mallock, as general secretary to the mission. I thought of taking Hendry, but I believe he'll be better employed here. Then I shall have first call of the typists. And with a personal secretary . . ."

"Are you taking that Miss Colthurst?"

Sheridan prepared silently for battle. Though he could detect no change in his wife's tone, he had learned, in twenty years, that, when she put "that" before a name, it signified suspicion or disapproval. "That Miss Colthurst", expanded from the telegraphic brevity of domestic communication, meant "that pretty Miss Colthurst", "that girl who'd be found too stupid to work for you ten minutes if she hadn't her looks to commend her", "that clever girl who receives only two hundred a year and spends twice two hundred on dress", "that discreet girl who accompanies you everywhere when less well-favoured secretaries could not be trusted".

"If her people can spare her," said Sheridan. "She's to find out."

"I think it's a mistake," Mrs. Sheridan sighed, with the courage of desperation. "She's far too attractive. You know how vulgar people can be, you don't want them to say 'Mr. Sheridan has a nice taste in secretaries.' And you know the way people talk when they're herded together on board without enough to do. It's not that I'm jealous, but I don't want you to run any risks. It isn't what you do that causes trouble in this world, it's what other people say."

Her daring exhausted, Mrs. Sheridan shrank back as though she expected to be struck. Though she was only a few years older than her husband, long conflict and longer mortification had aged her prematurely. Her brown hair was lustreless; her cheeks were fallen in; her big hazel eyes, mournful and restless, seemed to be aching for want of sleep. As a young girl Sheridan remembered with surprise that she had been beautiful; in the serenity of old age she would be beautiful again; but in middle life she had lost confidence without gaining resignation. Tortured by her nerves and half maddened by insomnia, she exasperated him by her pathetic efforts not to exasperate him.

"I don't pay much attention to gossip," Sheridan answered loftily. "Now, is there anything more you want to know? It's time I started."

"I mustn't keep you. And I mustn't neglect my own work."

IV

SHE was moving to a table spread with appeals to her charity when Sheridan escaped.

That, he decided, was really the word to use, for he had been let off lightly over Evelyn Colthurst and allowed to retire in good order without a single question about Auriol. It was not that Laura did not know of their friendship, though she probably preferred to call it "infatuation". However reluctantly, she had long realized that young, intoxicating women were necessary to him, if his mind was to be kept fresh; and, when he arrived radiant with a new discovery, she concealed her chagrin under an affectation of being happy for his sake. All she asked was that there should be no scandal. She was probably saying that this mission was ending what neither Auriol nor he was ready to end.

"Or bringing it to a head?" Sheridan asked himself.

If in six months' time he was still tied to Laura, if Auriol was still unmarried, if they were as anxious as ever to meet and the Otways were as anxious to keep them from meeting, they would all of them have to look facts in the face. His own feelings did not need to be explored, but how would the Otways cope with a problem which they hoped, in their muddle-headed way, to find solving itself? Presumably, to begin at the beginning, they would have received him if he had been unmarried; they would receive him as a widower; probably they would receive him, after a seemly interval, if his marriage were dissolved.

"If or when," he muttered and was surprised to find that he was in sight of a decision that would not wait for six months. "*When* it has been dissolved," he repeated. "And, of course, after a certain interval . . ." As though he were waking from a dream, he discovered that Auriol, whom he had always regarded as unattainable, was within his reach. "This wants thinking out. I must see Livingstone. . . ."

His solicitor could at all times be trusted to face facts. Now, as in a hundred other crises, he would say "You can do that, certainly," or "It won't pay." He would refrain from arguing. He would abstain from moral judgements and appeals to sentiment. He would look on this problem, as on every problem of life, with the eyes of a realist. Livingstone would say " You can have a divorce, but you must retire from public life," or " The whole thing will be forgotten in a year," or " It won't pay. The Otways will put their toes in the ground ; and, in the long run, this girl will side with them." Sheridan might not agree ; but, when he had stated his case, he was ready to be bound by Livingstone's judgement.

Walking slowly across the Park, he began to prepare his case. Within an hour—there was never any point in wasting time—he would know whether he or the Otways would win in a tug-of-war for possession of Auriol ; within two he would know how Laura had taken the announcement. After ten years, she could hardly be surprised ; and, even after ten years, it was not too late for her to make a new life with her schools and guilds and institutes. All she stood to lose in divorcing him was the daily presence of a husband who must be a daily embarrassment to her.

Sheridan could not be so sure of Livingstone's verdict when they considered the effect on public opinion. Thirty years ago, divorce had been synonymous with suicide for a politician. It was the sin for which there was no forgiveness. It had flung Parnell from power and kept Dilke from office. Though times had changed and opinion was more tolerant, the new spirit halted on reaching the precincts of parliament. Sheridan could count a dozen men who hugged the chains of a loveless marriage for fear of giving new life to a dying prejudice. He could name perhaps three who had been cast out and permitted to return on sufferance, not forgotten, only half forgiven, under the enduring shadow of their early misdeeds. He could think of no one with whom to overwhelm Livingstone. If he took the risk, trusting to his personality and position, he must be prepared to drop out of the running for office until the arbitrary public received him back into favour. Livingstone would not fail to ask him whether he wished to time his retirement for the moment when he returned to England in triumph, challenging ministers to refuse him a place if they dared.

There was only one answer to that question.

"No, by God, there's another!" Sheridan whispered. In thinking so much of Livingstone, he was borrowing the lawyer's professional timidity. There must be no talk of retirement. Granted the triumph, any man not a lawyer would use it to its uttermost. After challenging ministers to exclude him, he would challenge the public to eject him. "If they dare!"

V

As though his eyes had been suddenly opened, Sheridan threw up his head and walked quickly forward.

Livingstone could be disregarded; and Laura; and the Otways. This was a venture for him to undertake hand in hand with Auriol, each drawing strength from the other, two against the world. He wished that the six months were over and their challenge thrown down. He hoped Auriol would be alone, so that he might sweep her away on a flood of passionate eloquence; then he hoped that she would be surrounded and entrenched by her family, so that he might give battle without delay.

"I wonder what they say of me behind my back . . ."

Colin, no doubt, had dismissed him as a type before considering him as an individual. To the school of thought formed at Eton, in the Brigade and at the Staff College, the strange newcomer was always suspect. As a self-made and self-educated man, Sheridan must be a "rough diamond"; as a newly rich man, he must be a vulgarian; as a financier, he must be a "city sharp"; as an owner of newspapers and an independent member of parliament, he must be a self-advertising adventurer. The elder sisters took their opinions from their husbands, who took them from Colin, who was at least articulate. They would admit, rather grudgingly, that the fellow had done well by enlisting and then raising a battalion, but some one else was sure to add that he had done well for himself and that his war record was his best advertisement. No help could be expected of the younger generation.

The parents were old enough to have outgrown the cruder prejudices of ignorance. They were also clever enough to defend their ineradicable prejudices without exposing them. After many meetings, Sheridan could only guess vaguely what they thought of him : Lord Otway never embarked on a controversy for fear of hurting some one's feelings ; his wife would argue from every point of view in turn, happy if she could achieve a paradox and content if she could shew there was nothing new in life, nothing true and nothing that mattered. Between Lady Otway's persiflage and Otway's caution, it was impossible to get an answer to any question. When the time arrived for him to give battle, Sheridan felt uneasily that he would be begged not to raise his voice, perhaps adjured to recognize that people must sometimes agree to differ. To argue with the plump and smiling Lady Otway was like pommelling a feather-bed. He was obliged to fight them on their own ground with the weapons of their choosing ; if he used his native strength, he would justify them in all that they feared from his antecedents. If he could not come by good breeding, they would feel that he might at least have studied good manners.

A car passed him as he crossed Manchester Square ; and Sheridan caught sight of Lord Otway, thin, erect and closely buttoned. He hurried forward ; and they entered the house together.

"I've come to say good-bye," he explained. "Auriol was good enough to invite me to lunch."

"She's off next week," answered Lord Otway with a frown.

"She . . . ?"

"Didn't you know? Her mother's taking her abroad. She ought to see something of the world; and, if she really means to take up politics, this is the time, before she gets too much caught up."

Sheridan murmured his agreement and reviewed the announcement in relation to Lord Otway's manner in making it. This idea of a tour abroad was come to birth, fully armed, since last he had seen Auriol and before his own mission was made public. It engrossed her father's mind so much that he could spare no thought for the subject that every one else was discussing; and he threw out the news rather as if he did not expect to be believed. Sheridan chose to fancy that the family was divided and that Auriol was being sent abroad to be protected from unsettling influences.

"I didn't know anything about this. I came to say good-bye on my own account. In a very few days now . . ."

"Ah, yes! Your mission! I want to hear about that."

"Auriol's dead against it. She thinks I must be mad. I want to know why."

"I shouldn't pay too much attention to what she says. After all, she's only a child. And, because people like you listen to her nonsense and encourage her to air her opinions on all subjects, she thinks they have a real value."

"*I* think they have a real value. I think she's the most brilliant girl I've ever met."

Lord Otway shrugged his shoulders helplessly, as though he would have liked to argue the point, but thought it better that they should agree to differ.

"It's not good for her to know that," he sighed, as he led the way upstairs. "She's in danger of having her head turned. That's why I'm not sorry she's going abroad. This hot-house atmosphere . . ."

He broke off as they came into the drawing-room and Auriol jumped up to greet them.

CHAPTER II

The Creed of a Realist

"Oh those mute myriads that spoke loud to me—
The eyes that craved to see the light, the mouths
That sought the daily bread and nothing more,
The hands that supplicated exercise,
Men that had wives, and women that had babes,
And all these making suit to only live!"

ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society.*

I

IN the morning hours of their friendship, when Sheridan expressed surprise that any one, unless compelled, should live in a certain street, Auriol had improvised a theory that each district of London possessed a protective colouring for its inhabitants and that, when a man said he was looking for a suitable house, it would be almost as accurate to say that a house was looking for a suitable tenant.

"I can imagine you in Grosvenor Square," she explained, "but never in Green Street. And I don't think you could imagine us anywhere but Manchester Square. There's something peculiarly late-Victorian about Manchester Square. The Wallace Collection, dowager duchesses in reduced circumstances, survivors from Mr. Gladstone's last ministry. Something solid and rather gloomy; all the better for a coat of paint."

The description had recurred to Sheridan's mind as he accompanied Lord Otway upstairs. Manchester Square seemed always to have escaped the hurricanes of change. A chair-ridden man, seated year after year at one of these sombre windows might notice that carriages and hansom-cabs had given place to motor-cars and taxis, but he would know nothing of the trains that roared under Oxford Street nor of the omnibuses that raced by the great new shops and department-stores. The rising tide of democracy, the lightning-flashes of scientific discovery, the thunderbolts of war and revolution might assail the rest of London but these few quiet squares remained untouched. The invalid by the window could hardly have been surprised to see frock-coated young men walking with girls in leg-of-mutton blouses, or whiskered young men with women in bustles. During the war, he had been told by Auriol, her grandmother, discoursing of modern manners to a contemporary, saw no objection to dancing through a crisis. "*We* used to dance," she told her girlhood's admirer, "in the last war." And no one dared remind the old lady that the Crimean War was not the last war.

Manchester Square would certainly have been the better for a coat of paint; and some of its inhabitants, Sheridan reflected, would be none the worse for a mental spring-cleaning. There were times when he felt uncertain even of Auriol, fearing to find her an Otway under a veneer; times when his image of her as an untrammelled mind and an ardent spirit seemed an image of his own creation. Had her youth and good looks led him to idealize her? Had Laura and Evelyn Colthurst, the one so faded and the other so little refined, caused him to idealize even Auriol's looks and manner? As they shook hands, Sheridan felt a stab of misgiving that the thoroughbred quality which he seemed always to find in her had been imparted by his imagination. Was he preparing to do battle for some one who might prove to be commonplace? Women were never so wonderful as they seemed; they never continued so alluring as at the moment of discovery.

She was sitting with her back to the light, as he came in, but her poise and line reassured him.

"Look what Max has sent me! It's my birthday! I'm twenty-two." Her voice, bell-clear and rippling with happiness, had not changed. She brandished a cocktail-shaker in one hand, wiping the other on a tiny coloured handkerchief. Soft and strong, her hand had not changed either; and, as she turned to the light, he was not disappointed. "I suppose you don't know how to mix these things, do you?"

Sheridan smiled and carried the shaker to a table by the window:

"Many happy returns of the day, Auriol. Twenty-two? Rather before you were born, I was waving one of these things about for a living," he answered.

Lord Otway looked mildly uncomfortable, but the girl's eyes sparkled.

"What a glorious life! Do tell me!"

Sheridan smiled at her eagerness and addressed himself to the bottles on the table. No, he had not idealized her looks nor her indefinable thoroughbred quality! The first made him hungry for her, the second restrained him with a reminder that she was not an Evelyn Colthurst. Placed side by side, Evelyn had greater beauty of feature; and her frankly voluptuous lips and eyes were more immediately provocative than Auriol's virginal daintiness. For one man, however, that Evelyn might momentarily attract, Auriol would attract and hold a dozen, attacking head and heart, imagination and curiosity, without revealing—perhaps without knowing—that any of them had even noticed her. This unconsciousness of her power disabled a man more completely than her curious detachment in talking of herself. To the artists who tried to paint her, she explained that her face was made up of two parts which had nothing to do with each other. "Quite a good forehead, if I had a nose and mouth to go with it. And quite an amusing nose and mouth, if you take them by themselves. You should see me in a domino!"

Glancing up as he began to shake the cocktails, Sheridan felt that he was being watched by two people. The eager lips were ready to mock him, the pointed chin to jerk in disdain and the nose to wrinkle like an impudent schoolboy's if he made a mistake; the deep-set hazel eyes, however, were steady and serious, the broad, high forehead was bent in contemplation, as though a philosopher were studying a new system. Half man, half boy, she was more essentially feminine than any woman Sheridan had met, though her hair was cut short and fell back in thick chestnut waves from a boy's side-parting.

"Tell me!" she repeated, pushing back her hair with impatient fingers that seemed to draw copper light from the chestnut.

Her tone made Sheridan feel that she was accustomed to being obeyed.

"There's nothing to tell. I didn't care much about it, watching other people get drunk. I drank nothing in those days. I gambled a bit, though, and, before I was through, the others were settling in kind. As a result, I remember having two sheep-farms, half a radical paper, one general store and an interest in a gold-mine." He paused to hand the cocktails round. "It's wonderful what you can pick up on the spot. People in England heard of that gold-mine two years later."

"And you'd finished with it by then?"

He turned to find that Lady Otway had come in unobserved and was listening with the smile that never told whether she was laughing with him or at him.

"I was the other side of the world by then," he answered cautiously. "I hear you're going abroad, Lady Otway."

"And you too! How's Mrs. Sheridan? I can never persuade her to come here."

Glancing at his plump, enigmatic antagonist, Sheridan decided that, if she was to be won over to his side, he could not well begin too soon the task of dieting her with new and unpalatable ideas.

"We don't go out together much. In the phrase of the day, we rather cramp each other's style."

Lord Otway, with a sympathetic cluck, turned to examine the labels of the vermouth bottles and left his wife to extricate herself.

"Oh, I'm sorry! If only I'd known. . . ."

"But isn't it common property?" asked Sheridan. "When there are facts to face, I always think it's better to face them boldly. One makes mistakes when one's young; one doesn't allow sufficiently for change. I feel my marriage came to an end ten years ago. Sometimes I've wondered whether divorce, a new start . . ."

"Don't let's have any *more* divorce!" exclaimed Lord Otway. "At least . . . every man must judge for himself. We can't lead other people's lives for them or thrust our ideas down other people's throats . . ."

"You don't approve of divorce?"

Lord Otway finished his cocktail and coughed awkwardly

"*I* don't," drawled Lady Otway; "but then I'm not sure I don't disapprove of marriage more. It doesn't do any good to say these things, of course, though most of the harm in life is done by the people who won't say things." Refusing the proffered cocktail, she slipped comfortably into her favourite vein of universal scepticism. "I'm always saying things. I often say that people shouldn't be allowed to have children till they've shewn that their marriage is likely to be permanent; and they oughtn't to marry till they've lived together for a couple of years. You remember my taking you to *The Dover Road*, Auriol? Tell me about this mission, Mr. Sheridan. You're going to pull the empire together, aren't you, or something?"

"The terms of reference . . ." he began, only to stop on the brink of becoming pompous. Before he left the house, he was resolved to impress the Otways, but this vague woman with her baby face and sleepy eyes punctured his high seriousness with flippancy that could hardly be unpremeditated. Sheridan decided that, unless he studied her methods and turned them against her, he was in danger of finding his suit and himself laughed off the stage. "The terms of reference are pretty wide. If we *can* reconstruct the empire in our spare time . . ."

"I only hope you'll resist the temptation," interrupted Lady Otway. "Chilled meat is just as unpleasant when it comes from Australia as from the Argentine; and patriotism should stop short of the digestion. Our overseas dominions are always trying to hit us below the belt. Talking of which, I suppose you all know luncheon's ready and waiting. It's only ourselves, I'm afraid, Mr. Sheridan, but I look on you almost as one of the family."

As she led the way downstairs, still good-humouredly prattling, Sheridan tried to imagine what she meant by calling him almost a member of the family. Was this a hint that he haunted the house? Did they refer to him behind his back as "the family skeleton"?

He was glad, for some reasons, that the Cavalys and Wainwrights were not present: it would be time enough for him to meet their thinly disguised hostility when he had made plain his intentions to Lady Otway. At the same time this was the moment of his greatest public recognition; and he would not have been sorry to let them see him as the man who was called in to lift a burden under which every one else had sunk down crushed. For the first half of luncheon he allowed Auriol and her parents to make their own picture of him. Yes, it was a great responsibility. Yes, if he failed, he would lose whatever influence he now enjoyed. Yes, a great many people would like to see him failing. No, one could not refuse such an invitation; and, if he did not seem arrogant, he did not expect to fail. Yes, he had spent some years in Canada. Yes, he knew Australia well in the old days. And South Africa. Yes, he had probably visited most parts of the empire. That, no doubt, was why Mr. Standish had chosen him; that, if Lady Otway would allow him to say so, was why he really *hoped* to find time for "pulling the empire together", as she called it. The empire seemed worth it. From what he had seen of it, from what he had read . . .

By meeting flippancy with flippancy, Sheridan discovered half-way through the meal that he had won Lady Otway's attention. Probably, like the rest of her breed, she was bored and frightened by the high-falutin', but she ceased to scoff when he discoursed idly of remote, forgotten places and men as he had known them in his first years of work and wandering. Still half in jest, he described his discovery of the empire and waited, with the restraint of a practised orator, while the spell of the imperial idea stole over his audience. From the first, Auriol had been listening with parted lips and shining eyes; at some point they were all talking of distances and areas; by the end of luncheon Lord Otway was saying that even the puny empire of the Cæsars remained unintelligible to him in that it held together without modern means of communication.

"You had the majesty of Augustus behind you. 'I stand at Cæsar's judgement-seat, where I ought to be judged'," quoted Sheridan. "To me, that is the most tremendous moment in Saint Paul's life. You've been watching the rise and spread of a religion that you know is going to encircle the globe; and you suddenly find old Judaism and young Christianity set in perspective by this appeal to Cæsar. It overrides everything. The authority of Rome, coterminous with the civilized world, is suddenly invoked. But how small the Roman empire seems by comparison with our own! The Mediterranean basin, a belt of hinterland stretching out as one man after another tried to find scientific frontiers: that is all! Contrast the protection which Rome gave Saint Paul with the protection that a British missionary could claim from Mexico to Pekin, from Patagonia to Abyssinia. I only once diverted the British navy to my private uses," he continued with a smile. "That was when a gun-boat came to my rescue on the north coast of China. And I've only once taken refuge behind a British consul. That was in Celebes. 'Hast thou appealed unto Cæsar?' I knew the meaning of that phrase then."

As he paused, the temperature of the room fell. To Lady Otway, the pause—like the speech preceding it—must have seemed a thought too well calculated and dramatic, for she hastened to achieve an anti-climax by enquiring if any one could tell her where Celebes might be. She was really ashamed to ask, but geography was a thing that she never had known and never would know.

"What took you abroad in the first place?" she continued, when Auriol and Lord Otway had demonstrated the position of Dutch India with the aid of the cruets.

Sheridan roused with a start:

"I had to escape."

"Escape?" repeated Lord Otway.

Sheridan nodded and turned with a sudden smile to Lady Otway:

"From poverty, or something of the kind. Starvation or what-not."

His good-humour won him forgiveness for his faintly malicious mimicry of her bored drawl.

"You . . . er, had a pretty rough time in the early days, didn't you?" Lord Otway asked and waited uneasily.

"No worse than the majority," Sheridan answered unexpectedly.

"But when you talk about starvation . . . ?"

"I mean it! But the majority of mankind, year in, year out, taking one place with another, *is* half-starved! That's not the worst of human afflictions, though: I had in mind more the starvation of soul than of body. As a boy I believe I always had enough to eat: but, even as a boy, I wasn't satisfied with my prospects. The narrow, squalid surroundings in which I was reared were a blot on any moderately prosperous or enlightened country. At first, I said simply that I must get out of them; later, when I'd experienced the difficulties of escape, I said that no man must be left to fester there." As though conscious that he was being carried away by his own feelings, he turned to Lord Otway with a smile that disclaimed all intention of laying a trap. "I'm afraid this must sound the worst kind of Clydeside rant!"

"Not that! I was thinking, though, that, even if you divided the wealth of the world into equal parts or contrived a means of giving an equal start to all, you'd find inequality creeping in immediately. We aren't born with equal ability, we have to find our level . . ."

"But that," Sheridan interrupted, "you will never do so long as one class is held down by inadequate nourishment, low vitality and defective education and another—not necessarily a better—is bolstered up by the thousand and one tiny, indefinable influences that keep the ascendant class in the ascendant." Lord Otway's shrug hinted that this was a point on which they had better agree to differ. "I felt I had a mission to preach and to work for equality of opportunity," Sheridan continued. "People will tell you that, since I've become a 'capitalist'—whatever that may mean—I've lost my early sympathies. If I had, I might be more popular in such a company as this," he laughed. "If I had, I should not retain the confidence of the people whom I championed in my first youth . . . the people from whom I sprang. To my activities in those days you may trace the present distrust in which I'm held: I'd 'talked with crowds'; I 'kept the common touch'," he continued with a passing hint of defiance. "That is why I gave all my support to labour till it tottered and fell by the top-heavy weight of its own ineptitude. . . . But that's a far cry from those early days, the days when I felt I had a mission. . . . If it's not a rude question, Lady Otway, are these carnations from Lokshott? If not, I wish you'd tell me where you get them."

"Oh, never mind the carnations!" Auriol exclaimed.

"But I can't get any to compare with these . . ."

"'*You will* compel *me then to read the will?*'" murmured Lady Otway.

If the words carried to her husband or Auriol, neither shewed a sign of recognizing the quotation, but for a moment Sheridan's self-possession deserted him. This placid woman with the white hair and the sleepy eyes had marked and appraised each trick of oratory and was openly mocking his effort to lash Auriol's interest with simulated indifference.

"I feel I've been monopolizing the conversation," he apologized.

Should he go on, well knowing that Lady Otway was whispering "play-actor" to herself? Should he shew her that she could deflate his eloquence at will? Or that he was insensible to the malicious interruption as to every other? He could talk her down!

It must be on some other occasion, though, some other topic. About the martyrdom of his early days he never spoke for effect, never posed and never twisted truth. In the nightmare that he called his childhood Sheridan had seen human beings huddled in sties and kennels which the Otways would reject for an animal; in them, these human beings became animals, brutal and promiscuous. Their excitement was betting; their consolation drink. Unemployment haunted their prime and destitution dogged their old age. In spite of it all—so much older and wiser than civilization were the bodies which civilization stunted—the decay could be arrested. When the war came, authority straightened the bent frames of these people and trained their muscles. Authority put air into their lungs and filled their children's bellies. It doctored their peering eyes and pulled out their rotting teeth. Of the survivors, a high proportion were beginning—by the end of the war—to look like human beings again.

Sheridan frowned and asked leave to examine the carnations more closely. This was a subject on which he could not trust himself to speak with restraint; though he did not call himself a Christian, he could not be sure of remaining patient with the flippant wits who jested about the crucifixion. The condemnation of every one at that table lay in the tacit admission that they had achieved, in panic, what they protested was impossible before panic shewed the way. This feeding and training could all have been done before, but it was no one's business till the war made everybody the vital business of everybody else. Even so, there were numbered in their thousands the physical wrecks to whom the army said: "We cannot use you in any shape or form."

Mistrusting party-labels, Sheridan had entered the House of Commons as a radical in the belief that the radicals were clearing up this sty-and-kennel life, in the intervals of more pressing engagements. If they failed to solve the problems of drink and education, they at least admitted that the problems were waiting to be solved. They opened their eyes and observed that the kennels and sties really were not houses. They dammed destitution with old-age pensions; they fought disease and unemployment. If their progress was slow and belated, it could not be called inconsiderable by any one who remembered that they were distracted by one election after another, by antics of pantaloons that turned the House of Lords into the scene of a harlequinade, by meaningless and unnecessary squabbles in Ireland which the English of a hundred years hence would understand no more than they, in their generation, understood the Gordon riots. . . . And then the war came . . .

" I try not to think of anything that happened before the war," said Sheridan, as the silence all round him shewed that an answer was expected. " Don't think I feel any shame for the part I played ! " he begged Lord Otway. " It's only that the pre-war world has become a complex with so many people, breaking into their contemplation of the world since the war. I want to date everything from the fourth of August, nineteen-fourteen. Heavens, this has nothing to do with my early travels, but it may explain—if any one wants an explanation—why I have frankly boxed the political compass in the last ten years. On the fourth of August I took stock and found I was building on sand ! Well, by that time I'd made all the money I needed. I had the ear of the country and an independent position in politics. I had a press of my own. And . . . I had my original mission. The fourth of August taught me, however, that it was idle to erect houses in the place of pig-sties if they were to be at the mercy of the first fool that started a war. *Security* . . . Security became an antecedent condition. We must make life possible before we could make it decent. When the liberal party disappeared, I turned to labour. Not for long. . . . I had to dig deeper. During the war, I thought only of winning the war. After the war, I thought only of preventing another. And the prevention—the only prevention, as I see it—lies in a vast imperial reorganization : an empire, as I've said, organized on business lines, with the fixed objective of peace ; an empire

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so efficient—and therefore so powerful—that it could divide with the United States the control of the world. I believe that the conservative party can help me best to attain that, but it must be something bigger than the conservative party has ever imagined, an empire that, sooner or later, must co-operate with the United States. . . . This mission is my opportunity. But I've talked all this time without answering your question, Otway! I went away to escape! I ran away to sea. I'm afraid I deserted from my ship. You don't want to hear the whole of my discreditable history? You do? . . ."

II

Luncheon had come to an end before the tale of his adventures; and he only broke off when Colin Otway looked in with a present for Auriol and stayed to drink her health. His manner, to Sheridan's thinking, stiffened when he found a stranger present; and, as he pulled in a chair beside his father's, Sheridan felt he was being given fair warning that, when the thin, erect head of the family in one generation was no longer able to guard the door against intruders, his successor would be at hand, red of face, black of hair, closely-buttoned and taciturn, to relieve him.

"Mr. Sheridan has been telling us about his travels," explained Lady Otway. "What a pity we didn't know you in those days! We might be so much richer now!"

Sheridan smiled to himself at the contrast between these safe, conventional stay-at-homes and the men who had gone out to make hurried fortunes wherever they were to be found. He tried to picture Colin digging for gold in Australia or growing rubber in the Malay States; he could see Lord Otway participating in a Brazilian diamond-rush or a Canadian land-boom, as so many of his kind had participated already, arriving too late, half-expecting the British minister or the hall-porter of their hotel to direct them to the nearest diamond-field and send them there by car, finally returning home in disgust when they found that others had been before them. He himself had sometimes arrived too late for one thing, but he had always turned his attention to another. In the diamond-venture, he never handled a diamond, but he acquired some profitable sugar-mills. There was always something to buy: a mine, a port, a line, a paper. His ships had flown his house-flag from East London to Hobart, though he had never set out to be a ship-owner.

"People say it's harder to make money than it used to be. I doubt it," he answered, with his eye on Colin.

It would do this rigid and scornful young man no harm to share Lady Otway's diet of new ideas. Of his kind, Colin was the best specimen that Sheridan had met for many years: an efficient soldier, devoured by enthusiasm for his work, the heir to a responsible position with ideals of public service that were none the less exalted for being ill-expressed. Much could be made of Colin when he had learned that it was possible to believe in the excellence of his own school and regiment and order without belittling and misconstruing every one who belonged to a different school or order.

"Wish you'd shew me how it's to be done," Colin grunted.

"You can make money at any time if you're on the spot and if you've a little money to start the wheels moving. But it's no use being in London when the rubber's in Malaya; it's no use taking at swollen prices what the man on the spot has rejected months before; it's no use thinking that your deputy will make money for you if he can make it for himself. I'm certainly no abler than scores of other men; and the only luck I've known is that my Maker gave me an instinct for what average men and women are likely to want at average times. People in this country are too shy of the unfamiliar. Now, I've tried my hand at most things, from dairy-farming to gun-running. I knew nothing of either, but that happened to be the market of the day. Dairy farms were going cheap; and I bought literally for all I was worth. Guns were wanted by a rebel party in Ecuador; and I sold for all I was worth. On both occasions I just happened to be on the spot; but, if I'd been in Cuba or at the Cape, I should have found something that was going cheap or something that was in fantastic demand."

"It's easier to be in the right place at the right time if you have no ties to any one country," observed Lord Otway.

"I have ties in a dozen! And I regard them as safeguards rather than encumbrances. All my life I've never known where I should be in five years' time. Now, we were talking about divorce before luncheon. I'm told that the public here wouldn't tolerate me after a divorce. I don't believe it; but, if it were true, I could make a life, a position, a career for myself in half a dozen other places. It was worth keeping a finger in the press or the finances of these other places. I could start again without wasting time in cutting new footholds. That won't be necessary, though."

III

THE unexpected reference to divorce produced a silence which Sheridan left his audience to break. Lord Otway had already expressed a vague distaste entirely in keeping with his age, his connections, his utterances on divorce-bills in the House of Lords and—most strongly of all—his late-Victorian setting. Anything, he seemed to be saying, might happen south of Oxford Street, but in Manchester Square they were simple, old-fashioned folk who believed in the sanctity of married life and the validity of marriage-vows.

Having indicated his feelings once, he would not repeat himself; and Sheridan waited for some one else to take up the challenge. Colin was talking to his sister in an undertone, as though to hint that, if a man must wash his domestic linen publicly, it was best to ignore him; Auriol was listening and nodding as though she felt that in the second quarter of the twentieth century it was no one else's business whether a man divorced his wife or let her divorce him or lived with a mistress. Lady Otway was smiling at her own thoughts. The silence was ended when Colin finished his conversation and stood up to go.

"Wait for some coffee," his mother urged. "You're in no hurry, Mr. Sheridan? I want to study you."

"I am at your service," Sheridan laughed.

"You interest me; I'm wondering if I like you."

"Darling!" Auriol protested.

"What's the matter? Mr. Sheridan has been quite candid with us; and I'm sure he'd like us to be candid with him. I'm wondering what he's up to. Is there a fire in your room? Then let's have coffee there."

Though Colin had announced that he could only stay a moment, Sheridan observed that he had decided to keep them company. Perhaps he was interested in their conversation; perhaps he designed to keep the ranks of the family unbroken.

"You're off quite soon now, aren't you, sir?" was his sole effort at cordiality as they made their way to Auriol's sitting-room at the back of the house.

While they waited for their coffee, Sheridan lingered for a moment before Auriol's bookcases. The more one saw of her or of her family, the harder it was to explain how they shared a nearer ancestor than Adam! Huxley, Garnett, Arlen; the Sitwells; Siegfried Sassoon; Lytton Strachey and Guedalla Did the Otways read these books? Did they approve of their presence in Manchester Square? If not, did they exercise any control over this spiritual changeling who seemed to feed indiscriminately on poetry and economics, plays and blue-books? Her walls and tables were covered with signed photographs of writers, artists and politicians who seemed to have nothing more in common than that each was the most "advanced" of his kind. Like the rest of her generation, Auriol smoked and drank cocktails and went unattended in a way that Sheridan would not have permitted to his own daughter; but the rest of her generation had not the Otways for parents. They could not approve; were they afraid to check her?

"You were speaking about your terms of reference..." began Lord Otway.

Sheridan was so much absorbed in the problem of Auriol's relations with her family that he turned with a start at finding himself addressed. Unwittingly, he looked first for Auriol and discovered her draped along the back of a sofa, chin on fists and heels in air, watching him. Her eyes fell, as he turned, but not before he had caught an expression that puzzled him. Solemn, expectant, rapt: what did it mean? He had never before seen Auriol looking like that: she reminded him curiously of a retriever lying at her master's feet, gazing up and waiting for the tiny stir that would shew he was going to take her out.

"Nominally I'm to investigate communications and labour-supply," he answered in his most businesslike tone. "Standish hopes I can find him a cure for unemployment," he added. "Actually. . . . Well, I've told you. I've been mixed up with many kinds of enterprises and every one of them would have been bankrupt if I'd run it as this empire is being run. We've been saved by luck, by natural resources and by the amazing tenacity of the British people."

"By their amazing power of improvisation," suggested Lady Otway. "It's the one form of genius that the British race has evolved."

" Curing pneumonia was the one form of genius that my late father-in-law evolved," Sheridan rejoined. " If you went to him with an ordinary cold, he turned it into pneumonia and then cured you. Or so people say. It was . . . drastic. I'm afraid I hate improvisation. I hate muddle and waste. And I believe humanity benefits by the British empire."

" Do you care much about humanity ? "

" I care about efficiency. I should like to make humanity efficient. It appeals to the imagination."

"And to the taste for power ? "

Sheridan smiled and looked about him for a chair This duel was diverting ! As a rule, the women he met were so anxious to agree with his lightest word, from fear or in the hope of favour ; it was a new experience, in a party of five, to discover a girl with the assurance of an old woman and an old woman with the directness and intuition of a child. Some day, when the game was over, he would like to replay it, explaining each of his moves and learning the purpose of hers. Otway and the boy cut a poor figure beside their womenkind.

" I was once," Sheridan recalled, " cast upon an island inhabited by a man who'd lived the life of a hermit for thirty years. He had no taste for power : he was the only man I ever met who hadn't."

"A *taste* for power . . ." Lord Otway began.

" Once you admit the taste, you must admit the consequences that it entails : a certain impatience, a certain hardness, a certain dependence on limelight. In a word, my more conspicuous failings."

Lady Otway smiled and shifted her attack :

" I saw in *Who's Who* the other day that you'd been given that medal thing for saving life at sea. You don't mind being asked questions ? How did you come by that?"

From the corner of one eye Sheridan saw that Auriol had raised her head and was hanging on his answer.

He saw, too, that Lord Otway and Colin were staring at their boots in dread that he was going to make a hero of himself for a couple of women.

"I gave the Royal Humane Society no peace. The scene was carefully stage-managed; I had my witnesses."

"Was it done for advertisement? Limelight?"

Though both the speakers were enjoying their set-to, the calm question brought Auriol to her feet in a flush of protective indignation.

"Mummy, how dare you!" she cried.

The men, Sheridan thought, looked embarrassed; and he was now sure that Colin had called him "self-advertising" in hastening into the ranks and urging the millions of his readers to follow his example.

"It's a perfectly proper question," he answered good-humouredly. "No, that wasn't my first idea, though of course I saw the advertising possibilities. The fact was, I lost my head. There's a convention that one *does* jump in when a child falls overboard; and I jumped without ever stopping to consider that I was a man who'd made good, with one career behind me and another in front, while this brat might grow up into a criminal, a waster, an imbecile. It just shews the harm of not overhauling the ideas you've been brought up in."

The apparent cynicism of the answer angered Auriol more than the original question.

"The one is as bad as the other!" she exclaimed in disgust.

"I should imagine that's the truest word Mr. Sheridan has ever spoken," said Lady Otway. "Humanity in bulk appeals to his imagination, when he's made it efficient, but he takes no interest in the individuals who make up humanity. Isn't that so? You're quite callous?"

"No more than other men; I pretend less than they do. I'm a realist."

"Rather more ruthless, then?"

" The greatest good of the greatest number is always being sacrificed to the incompetence or ill intention of the few whom no one is ruthless enough to destroy. You see it in every government, on every board of directors. Men who may have been useful once . . ."

" You measure every man by the use you can make of him ? " Lady Otway interrupted.

" Who does not ? "

IV

BEFORE any one could answer him, Colin stood up with a whispered apology and slipped out of the room. If his action was not intended as a protest, it might all too easily be mistaken for one ; and Lord Otway made haste to obliterate the manner of his going.

" You mean that ? " he asked, moving to the fireplace and addressing Sheridan over his shoulder. " Somebody once defined a gentleman as one who put more into the world than he took out. I should say we're divided into those who make ourselves useful to others and those who make others useful to us. I should be sorry to think that any one would put me, or you, or my wife, or Auriol into the second category."

" I'm not a gentleman by birth," Sheridan answered with a laugh ; " and I doubt if either business or politics tends to make many gentlemen in practice. Whether I am putting more into the world than I take out, whether I am exploiting or serving humanity I must leave others to say. I assert frankly, however, that I choose my political associates in the belief and hope that I can use them. Why, what earthly reason otherwise should I have for sitting on the same platform as Standish and Orpington ?"

" Or they with you ? " interposed a quiet voice.

Auriol had lain so long without speaking that the others had forgotten her.

" Or they . . . ? " Sheridan echoed.

"*They* believe they can use *you*. That's why I said you must be mad to take this mission," she explained.

"Mr. Sheridan has said that he expects to make a success of it," said Lord Otway. "If he does, no one can doubt the wisdom of his undertaking it. He will have the ball at his feet." He was interrupted by the soft chime of a clock. "Half-past three! My dear, we must ask Mr. Sheridan to excuse us . . ."

With a sigh of regret at being dragged away from a spectacle that amused her, Lady Otway stood up and shook hands:

"We have to hurry away. So sorry! There's no reason why you shouldn't finish your cigar in peace, if you don't mind being left with Auriol. It's been so interesting to hear you . . ."

"I don't know that I've said anything very new . . ." Sheridan protested.

Half-past three! He should have left half an hour ago and more! In part he had lost count of time, in part he had been awaiting an opportunity of forcing the conversation back to the question what a man should do when in fact his marriage had come to an end ten years before and he wanted to take a new wife. With her charming, if sometimes exasperating, lack of concentration, Lady Otway had led him a wild-goose chase over Humane Society medals and desert islands and the short definition of a gentleman.

"It's the way you said it," she was now answering enigmatically.

Sheridan walked into the hall and came back to find Auriol cross-legged on a cushion in front of the fire. The bookcase with its modern novelists and poets reminded him of his earlier puzzling. Very few months had passed since he was begged not to visit Auriol at Cambridge, not to take her out to dinner, not—in effect—to see her unless the family was at hand. Now that he was "almost one of the family"—whatever that might mean—he was left alone with her. Did the Otways think that he would make love to her abroad but not at home? Were they washing their hands of her? Or had they suddenly discovered that he was a man to be trusted? More strongly than ever, Sheridan would have liked to hear from Auriol what the family thought of him, but, whenever they were alone, she became curiously impersonal and detached, talking as though she were a man of his own age. Now, for five minutes, she spoke as Livingstone might have spoken when Livingstone was in a vein of gentle reproach, rebuking him for seeking advice when it was too late.

"You can't go back now," she began, "but it was a ghastly mistake. You're playing their game. When Mr. Standish formed his government, you had a right to be included. He was overpersuaded at the time, but you could have enforced your claim. Now you're letting them send you into exile for six months."

"Six months is not long. Except when I spend it away from you, Auriol," he ventured with a smile.

"But they've set a trap for you. If you came back victorious in six months' time, it would be different, but they're giving you a problem they can't solve for themselves in the hope you'll break yourself."

Sheridan strolled to the window and stood, unconscious that he was posing, in the attitude which had endeared him to caricaturists and their public for a dozen years. With legs apart and hands clasped behind his back, he let the point of his chin fall half-way to his chest and stared from under knitted brows.

"And you imagine I should take it up if I didn't think I could solve it? The tories are the least intelligent of all parties and they're also the least proud! They don't mind where they look for a leader: Disraeli, Chamberlain, George, Churchill. They fancy, in a queer, muddled way, that a man who's big enough to lead them is meek enough to serve them. They've forgotten that a time came when they had to open their most sacred doors to their servants. Dizzy, Chamberlain . . . Will Standish be able to get on without me in six months' time ?"

Auriol looked up swiftly :

"I hope not."

"Then am I acquitted of madness ?"

"If you really think you'll succeed."

"I do. Don't you, Auriol ?"

"I don't know. I was so furious to think they'd trapped you."

Without moving from the window, he turned slowly to look at her :

"If I tell you I shall succeed ?"

"I shall believe you ! I have absolute faith in you."

"You're the one person who has ! And I don't suppose you'll ever know what that means to me. I don't know what I should have done in the last few months if I hadn't had your faith to back me. I was . . . disappointed, Auriol, when Standish passed me over. I don't know what I shall do in the next six months. Without you. Will you miss me ?"

"You know I shall !"

"Dear child, I *don't* know ! That's the reason I'm here now. It's the reason I've said things to-day that I shouldn't have said otherwise. It's the reason I'm going away. It'll be the reason I come back, if I ever do."

He took a step forward, but stopped before reaching her. Auriol had scattered an inch of cigarette-ash over her skirt and was flicking it away with her scented square of coloured handkerchief.

"If . . . you . . . ?" she repeated indifferently.

"If I ever do. My dear, this can't go on ! Don't you know I'm in love with you ?"

CHAPTER III

The Speech of a Romantic

" History shows you men whose master-touch
Not so much modifies as makes anew :
Minds that transmute nor need restore at all.
A breath of God made manifest in flesh
Subjects the world to change from time to time,
Alters the whole conditions of our race
Abruptly, not by unperceived degrees
Nor play of elements already there,
But quite new leaven, leavening the lump,
And liker, so, the natural process."
ROBERT BROWNING : *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society.*

I

" *I didn't know.*"

To Sheridan, grimly prepared for surrender or repulse, for dismay, protests or collapse, it seemed that Auriol received the announcement with staggering self-possession. She was not pleased, she was not annoyed, she was not shocked, she was not frightened. If her expression became a little strained, she was only reflecting unconsciously the emotion in his own face. She did not shrink away nor change colour ; and her lips were steady, though her eyes opened wider than their wont. Not until she had dusted away the cigarette-ash and got rid of her absurd handkerchief would she even attend to him.

" I thought you must have seen . . ." Sheridan muttered.

" Mummie had an idea . . . . I believe that's why I'm being sent abroad." At last she began to flush, but on her own account more than his. " Some idiot . . . People seem to think it's impossible for a man and woman to meet. . . . The family have been dropping hints for a long time, but no one has the courage to speak out. I *didn't* know, honestly. I knew you liked coming here. You said I had a way of putting things . . ."

"I said you inspired me," he broke in.

"That was very charming, of course . . ."

"You don't believe it? When I'm with you, I can see visions, Auriol! I can think. When I go away, I can work. Your faith gives me faith in myself. *Without* you . . ."

"Don't say you can't work without me," she interrupted. "It would be absurd. A year ago we'd never met. You're going away now for six months . . ."

"But I shall feel I have you with me! In spirit. You don't understand? Auriol, imagine we were married. Imagine you died. I should be broken-hearted. I should never be able to work again. You can imagine that? Well, can't you imagine that I work better, that I can only work when you're beside me, in body or spirit? That's what I mean by inspiration. You're essential to me."

II

VERY slowly, perhaps because she shared her family's dislike of pregnant words, perhaps because she had for the first time to measure the implication of this one, Auriol repeated:

"Essential?"

"Don't you understand?"

Again he took a step towards her and again halted in perplexity. If she was not luring him on, she ought to have been frightened as he drew near, hungry for her. He could have picked her up in one hand, crushing her till her cold young blood took fire from his own. No woman with passion already kindled had stirred him as he was stirred by this girl whose passion was not yet born. Had she set herself to madden him, like some of the women who had pitted their indifference against his ardour, she could not have found a surer way than by artlessly sitting curled at his feet and tantalizing him with her supple, slender youth. He wanted to bury his face in the fragrance of her hair and to feel her white arms tightening about his neck as her lips fluttered against his.

"We must think what we're going to do about it," she told him with a frown. "It wasn't worth issuing ultimatums a week before I went away, but I don't suppose we shall be allowed to meet much when you come back." The frown gave place to a puzzled smile. "Especially after this," she added.

"After this, we can never meet on the old terms." He waited to hear her say that, after this, they could at last meet as they wanted, but the passion in his voice called forth no echo in hers. His heart quickened in apprehension as he realized for the first time that perhaps he was going to fail; and with a hot rush of shame he recalled that he had preened himself only that morning, like a chorus-girl before a looking-glass, demanding how any one could resist him. "Auriol, d'you care for me at all?"

"Of course I do! I care for you, I believe in you Didn't you say that my faith . . . ?"

"That's for my work, not me."

"I've never thought about you apart from it. You were married; till to-day I didn't know there was anything wrong . . ."

"If I were unmarried . . . ?" he began, then hesitated as he saw that she was not yet ready for the question. "I was talking about divorce to-day, because it's time we faced facts. I had that in mind when I accepted the mission. We couldn't afford to act in a hurry, I said, but six months' calm reflection . . . We can't go on like this. If I find that things haven't changed when I get back, I shall ask my wife to divorce me. You say you've never thought of me apart from my work. Well, I want you to think, Auriol, during the next six months . . ."

"Oh, but this isn't fair!"

Sheridan smiled at this first ripple on the surface of her indifference.

"Why not?"

"Your *wife*! It's not fair on *her*! It's not fair to ask *me* . . ."

"To break things up? I'm not. If I had no wife, would you even consider marrying me? I've made a certain position for myself, but I'm not of your clay." He could see her preparing an angry protest and continued obstinately in the same vein. "Your people would oppose it, tooth and nail. I'm nearly twice your age. I've lost my bloom. A life like mine blunts the finer feelings. Every one would tell you I shouldn't be an easy man to marry. In spite of that, you believe in me; we're friends. If I said I was in love with you—I have!—if I said I couldn't get on without you . . ."

"But that's absurd!" she interrupted impatiently. "People are mad about love. If I'd never been born . . ."

"I shouldn't have fallen in love with you."

"If I tumbled down under a motor-bus . . ."

Sheridan raised her to her feet and drew her to the arm of his chair. His touch failed to rouse her; and she seemed indifferent whether he held her hand or let it go.

"Shall I tell you what would happen? To me? It *will* happen if things are the same in six months' time. I shall be done for. I shall give up the struggle. That's why I said '*if*' I came back. I need you, Auriol."

"But . . ."

"You think I'm mad, too, when it comes to love? We all are. *You*'ll find that. You've never let yourself think of me in relation to love. I was married. You'd think it wrong; wrong for me even to kiss you, though my marriage has been so long over. Wouldn't you?"

As she hesitated, he slipped his arm round her shoulders and kissed her. She was less surprised than he had expected, till he remembered that girls kissed more freely than in the time of their mothers. Auriol had been kissed before; all her friends, probably, kissed her; none of them, quite certainly, had been less unsuccessful than he in making her feel that a kiss could matter. She was acquiescent and uninterested, a little frightened perhaps at being kissed by a married man but still more frightened of seeming prudish or old-fashioned. He withdrew his arm and tried to guess why she was frowning.

"How long . . . ?" she began.

"Since I first set eyes on you."

Her hand rested for a moment on his shoulder as she changed her position. The touch was protective, as though she were realizing her power over him and promising not to abuse it.

"I must have time to think!" she laughed uneasily. "Oh, I wish this hadn't happened. I'm so sorry . . ."

"Darling child, it's not your fault! It wasn't your fault that you were born or that destiny threw us together . . ."

"I'm sorry for *you*. Why should you be bothered . . . ? I used to think I helped you a bit. If I've been upsetting you all the time, interfering with your work . . ."

Clearly, she could only see him through his own work. She was dazzled by his career, but she could think of it without thinking of him as the hero of it. Her voice, too, was now protective and very slightly troubled, as though she realized her responsibility. So a sick wife might have apologized for wasting his time with her aches and pains. It was strange to remember how many other women had cared so much for him that they forgot his position, while this girl would only melt to him if she could be shewn to have endangered his work.

"We won't talk about it any more now," he told her. "I dragged the subject in by the shoulders rather, because I felt I must come to an understanding before I went away I've not found it easy to meet you, Auriol; and I've not found it easy to meet your parents. Or any one else who knew anything or suspected anything. After this, though . . . I'm not pressing you for a decision, but I can put my own mind at ease by dropping a hint to certain other people. My wife. Your father. I shall say that I'm going away for six months' calm reflection. At the end of six months I may be dead . . . or cured; you may be married to some one else. If *not* . . . If not, Auriol, I shall make my wife divorce me. And when I'm free to ask you . . ."

"But I *can't!*"

"Can't what? I'm not asking you to do anything: I'm telling you what I shall say to your father . . ."

"And if I tell you in six months' time that I can't marry you?"

III

She was not, he found, to be stampeded. And, until she herself knew the sensation of losing her head, she would not believe that other people could lose theirs. So long as he affected to be helpless, he could indeed work on her queer feeling of responsibility for making him helpless; the moment he proclaimed that he would do this or that, she seemed to feel that he had recovered his manhood and could look after himself. Helplessness was an attitude which Sheridan was not accustomed to assuming with women, but he had never before been required to think out an attitude for a girl who protested, in her chill ignorance, that people became absurd as soon as they began to talk about love.

"Well, no one in the world can compel you," he laughed.

"But what will you do?" she persisted.

"Isn't that rather . . . ?" he began stiffly. "How shall I put it? You're free to do what you like with your own life; I, in my turn . . ."

'You'd throw up everything?"

Auriol's voice and eyes were no longer protective. She was using all her strength now to keep one already stronger than herself from mastering her with a foul blow.

"I should find it necessary to put my house in order after my long absence,' he answered with laboured irony. "My interests are pretty wide. I shouldn't be justified in neglecting them. Good heavens, I've a house in Ottawa—one of the finest in the city, I believe—which I've never seen. I should want to see that. I might fall so much in love with it. . . . We were talking about Ottawa," he explained in a changed voice, as the door opened and Colin came in.

His hat was in his hand; and he was murmuring "Er, has the guv'nor . . . ?" before he was well inside the room. Sheridan recalled that his own hat was still lying on the hall-table and pictured Colin's change of expression as he told himself that "this fellow" was still here, that it was high time somebody sent him about his business, finally that he would do it himself if no one else would. For a moment Sheridan was enraged that this silent, scornful boy with the unsuccessful moustache and the mass-production tie and manner of the Brigade should come and come again to spy on him; then he remembered that, if Colin had burst in five minutes earlier, he would have found his cherished sister swinging her legs from the arm of the intruder's chair. Ten minutes earlier, the intruder's lips had been pressed against Auriol's; it was an unsatisfactory kiss, but it would have exasperated Colin beyond bearing. And perhaps one should really be grateful for an interruption that promised to leave those last words graven indelibly on Auriol's mind.

"Daddie are you looking for?" she asked. "He went off with mummie half an hour ago."

"Damn!" Colin muttered, as though he had missed a meeting that might change the course of his life. "Imogen's looking for you."

"Did you tell her I was here? Well, you might."

As the door closed, Sheridan stood up to say good-bye before anything could be said to weaken his ultimatum, but the bell of the telephone rang and Auriol hurried to it without seeing his outstretched hand. She was still thanking some one for his good wishes when Mrs. Wainwright came in; and thereafter for an hour, whenever he tried to take his leave, Auriol begged him to stay a moment longer and, whenever he resumed his seat, a new caller was announced or a new voice hailed her by telephone.

Sitting unobtrusively in a corner, Sheridan studied Auriol in a setting that was unfamiliar to him. By thinking of her as ten years older than her age, he had forgotten that she was only two-and-twenty; by ranging her beside him, he had forgotten that he was taking her out of her element. Now her element engulfed her. Sheepish young men and voluble young women, faultlessly turned out and all of one pattern, poured in with presents of flowers and books. One in three, when Auriol remembered to introduce them, turned out to be a cousin; male and female, she addressed them as "darling" and kissed them. When he had married her, Sheridan presumed that he would have to know all these people, unless Auriol dropped them in favour of his own friends; he was dismayed to find how few he had ever met. Orpington's boy, Lord Selhurst, and his three sisters, Guy Cavaly, Geoffrey Mallock and half-a-dozen more were known to him; the rest belonged to another world.

It was a world, apparently, where people existed for amusement; and Sheridan was first contemptuous, then exasperated as these boys laid their plans for wasting Auriol's time at theatres and dances. Exasperation yielded to alarm as he measured the chasm between their world and his own. Never had he felt so much "out of things"; if this group was a section of what people called "society", he had never before realized that, though he might be a hundred miles above it, he was not—and never would be—of it. Were the Otways relying on Auriol's inherited sense of values when she came to compare him with the people of her own breed? Had it ever occurred to them that she might be making a scale of values for herself?

As the giggling and chatter seemed to be wound for perpetual motion, Sheridan hoisted himself to his feet and murmured that he must really be going.

"But I want to talk to you!" Auriol cried. Then she turned to the others. "You must run away now, children. Mr. Sheridan and I have business to discuss. Where had we got to? Oh, you were telling me about your house in Ottawa. I don't see the connection . . ."

Sheridan smiled as the room gradually emptied. These boys and girls were the friends of Auriol's childhood, but her willingness to get rid of them hinted that they did not rank high in the scale of values which she was making for herself. Achievement on a certain plane counted for more than pedigree.

"I was saying I should go to Ottawa on the day when I felt I could no longer do useful work here," he answered.

"Is that a threat?"

Colin was standing by the open door; and she spoke in a whisper, bright-eyed for battle. When he shut it, he shut himself in; and Sheridan was constrained to laugh for fear of losing his temper

"You were asking what my plans were," he reminded her. "I've had this in mind for some years as a possibility. You weren't in Paris during the peace conference? Ah! I felt that the world of which Paris pretended to be the centre had passed away."

"Ottawa seems a counsel of despair," Colin murmured, throwing himself into a chair with patent determination to outstay his sister's visitor.

"The task before any one who felt a responsibility for the good order of the world . . ." Sheridan continued, disregarding him.

"'*Take up the White Man's Burden*'," Colin quoted, refusing to be disregarded.

Quick to appraise the probable persistence of an interrupter, Sheridan decided that Colin was not to be shaken off easily. He realized, too, that his own last two sentences had been keyed for the public speech or the leading article rather than for an undress conversation with a girl from Cambridge and a young man from the Staff College.

"If you like to put it like that," he acquiesced good-humouredly.

"Isn't Kipling—the Kipling of those years—rather *vieux jeu*?"

"To the superficial, no doubt." With the merits of the question Sheridan could not concern himself; it was the tone, which Lady Otway and all her circle employed to drown reality in frivolous insincerity, that he had to attack. The leader-writer lifted a head that was still unbloody and had been only temporarily bowed. "They were the years in which my faith was taking shape. I should say that Kipling's work and vision in those days will never be *vieux jeu*. The empire had grown haphazard, so I don't blame any one for not recognizing its existence; but they wouldn't recognize its existence yet if he hadn't pointed it out to them."

"Which he did twenty to thirty years ago," Colin persisted. "Galileo, at a date of which I am unfortunately ignorant, pointed out that the earth revolved round the sun or the sun round the earth (I can never remember which). Galileo is rather *vieux jeu* nowadays, though. We've assimilated him."

The manner, now defining itself as one of vague scepticism and of mental superiority that was far from vague, resembled his mother's nearly enough to be irritating in any one of less than his mother's age.

"You'll have to assimilate him again if his discovery is challenged," Sheridan retorted. "You may have to assimilate Kipling again for the same reason. The empire which he preached came to an end with the war. Every part had done so well that it claimed equality with every other; equality and independence. At the peace-conference the dominions were independent powers. (That was how the Ottawa house came to be bought.) Since then, they've refused to be bound by Downing Street: they ratify a treaty or not as they please; and, when Lloyd-George contemplated war at Chanak, he cabled to know if the dominions would stand in with him. The Holy Roman Empire was called a chaos upheld by providence; the present British Empire is a chaos upheld by telegraph-wires. And nobody is trying to repair the damage of the peace-treaty; hardly any one sees what it did. I hope when I take out this mission of mine . . . But I don't want to bore your brother!"

IV

THOUGH he smiled good-humouredly, Sheridan contrived to make his tone faintly patronizing, as though Auriol and he were grown-ups indulgently suiting their conversation to the intelligence of a child.

Colin flushed and made haste to veil his hostility

"I thought you were going to investigate unemployment," he began.

"I've yet to discover what I have to investigate. Every one knows that unemployment exists; and I at least know that it can be cured. What would you think if Huddersfield were filled with unemployed of every kind while Bradford clamoured for workmen of every kind?" he demanded impatiently. "At this moment England is filled with unemployed and Australia is empty of men. *Dangerously* empty. And that's my opportunity! I want something more than a tariff: I want a common trade-policy that will lead to a common foreign-policy and a common defence-policy. Inevitably we must come to an imperial council. You can't have prime ministers neglecting their duties at home and journeying half-way round the world to make agreements with one government and then to have them rejected by the next. . . . I believe your historian will say that, if the Versailles conference ended the old empire, the Chanak incident gave birth to the new one. Few, very few people have realized it yet. Not the dominions, certainly. They're still very jealous. Yet, if they'd only be patient, time is fighting on their side. Let them consent to the imperial council, sitting permanently wherever the capital of the empire may be fixed . . ."

"Wherever . . .?" Colin interrupted.

His voice had softened to a new interest, almost a new deference; and Sheridan smiled to himself. By patience and persuasiveness he had won a hearing at luncheon. Then he had talked to Lady Otway and at Auriol; and he talked at Auriol again now, though he addressed himself to Colin.

The House of Lords, he explained, was the natural home, at present; but the focus would shift from London. After all, England had only belonged for two thousand years to the continent of Europe because Europe was the centre of the civilized world from the birth of the Roman empire. There were two civilized worlds now, each with its own centre, the Atlantic dividing them. So long as it divided, there could still be two worlds ; but the Atlantic, when a man steamed across it in five days and flew in less, would unite. There would only be one centre then. And it would not be Stockholm nor Berlin nor Vienna ; nor Paris, except for fashions in frocks ; nor Rome, except for a fashion in faith. It might be London for a time, so long as Great Britain controlled the shipping and banking of the world ; but North America had the food, the population, the space, the raw material. Very soon the money would follow ; and government would follow the money. London would become a second Rome ; and the new Constantinople . . .

"Ottawa ?" asked Auriol.

"I bought my house on the chance of it," Sheridan laughed, "though I shan't live to see the transfer. Ottawa or Washington."

"Tokio ?" asked Colin.

Sheridan shook his head. If the future of the world lay with the yellow races, Europe and America must bow their heads ; but, before that day, they would resist in a way that would leave few heads to bow. Japan by herself could not dominate the world ; and, before Japan had time to arm, drill, organize China, the white peoples would have started a preventive war. Speaking slowly, as though he had forgotten his audience, Sheridan ruled out the Far East and South America. No one had yet scratched the surface of Brazil, but he put his faith in the temperate zone and he specifically withheld it from a race of mulattos. It was a gamble, he declared, between the States and Canada : the States had a colossal start, but Canada had a long, a very long experience. The ancestors of modern Canada settled England and devised parliamentary government, they rejected the papacy and cut off a king's head; the succession which the States broke in their war of independence was unbroken in Canada. And all the political wisdom of England lay at Canada's service. What could the States know of anything outside the States? They had not been fighting their neighbours for a thousand years; they had not been sharpening their diplomatic wits with emperors and popes; they had not been administering a quarter of the earth's surface, with every colour and faith and custom known to man. They were what they called themselves: a great new country. Canada was a great new country, too; but she was backed by an old tradition and could draw on an old experience.

As though he were recollecting his audience for the first time, Sheridan paused and allowed a smile to relieve the mesmeric earnestness of his expression:

"You'll think me very arrogant; but, when I bought that house, I had an idea of educating Canada up to her imperial mission. I wanted to prepare Ottawa for the day when Ottawa would be the capital of the empire. Then . . . then I saw that I was before my time; the empire was still to make, we must create the idea of a federal capital before we could transfer the capital from the old world to the new."

"But you kept the house?" asked Colin, impressed in spite of himself.

"One never knows when it may be needed. As I see no virtue in false modesty, I have talked to you with complete candour. I may, as I was telling your sister, find that my usefulness in this country is exhausted. Already I feel I've done as much here as any man outside the cabinet can hope to do. I could do more in Australia, Canada, South Africa . . ."

"But . . ." Colin wriggled impatiently at this showy juggling with continents. False modesty might have no virtue; but this fellow, the wriggle seemed to suggest, was talking like a megalomaniac. "You can't just walk in . . ."

Sheridan looked round the room and smiled again. The only pictures on the walls were indifferent water-colours of Lokshott, the Cornish seat of the Otways, their former source of consequence, their present and future cause of penury. How deeply rooted they were to a single corner of a single island! How the parochialism of the English landed proprietor choked the development of an imperial sense! And how, if they only saw it, the Otways and their like, living in a prison and mistaking it for a demesne, played into the hands of the mobile, landless Sheridans of politics and commerce!

"Political conditions are fundamentally the same in all countries," he answered. "When a diplomat goes to a new post, he must learn from the beginning the personal atmosphere, the society, perhaps even the language of the place. So with the politician: he acquires a new jargon. He is like the engineer, the doctor; if he knows his job, he can practise anywhere; and all he need learn is a handful of new technical terms. As I learned them when I took up politics in England. I'm English-born, but it was a toss-up where I settled. I was at sea when most men are learning their political A B C; and, at an age when other men were in parliament, I was learning the A B C of politics and of many other things. The late start handicapped me in some ways, but it gave me time to make money and to become a cosmopolitan. I tell you with complete conviction that I can practise in politics wherever you put me, in just such time as I need to learn the language. When I decided on England, one of my critics—a Canadian—said that, wherever I went, I should found a paper within a month, form a party within a year and make a government within five. My party is still a party of one . . ."

"You've founded more than one paper," said Colin, with a grimace which he was at little pains to hide.

"I'm afraid that's not a merit in your eyes. And yet—correct me if I'm wrong—I always feel that those who vilify the popular press are moved to some extent by disappointment and jealousy. When your grandfather taught the masses to read, Otway, he lacked the foresight to lay down *what* they should read; and the influence which he had once enjoyed passed to men like Newnes, Pearson, Harmsworth. If the *Post* and the *Telegraph* had come out at a halfpenny, I doubt if the *Mail* and the *Express* would ever have cut in. You're disappointed that you missed your chance; you're jealous that your wisest words are drowned by the thundering headlines of the *Daily Mail*. Perhaps you exaggerate a little the power of, say, the Sheridan press, when it's in competition with the Rothermere press, the Beaverbrook press, neither of which have any great cause to love me . . . I'm afraid you must look on the popular press as something that's come to stay, though . . ."

"That's no reason why I should like it."

"No."

Sheridan pulled out his watch and sprang up with an expression of dismay.

He had still much to learn about this family, but he had already learned by his experience of an afternoon that, if the Otways were to be overcome, it must be by a sudden attack. At luncheon he had knocked Lady Otway off her feet and then allowed her to pick herself up. After shaking Colin's sublime self-satisfaction, he was somehow letting him settle down more deeply than ever into a narrow conviction of his own infallibility. If Auriol was to be moved, she must be moved by the roots, not merely bent by a blustering wind. Perhaps she realized this; perhaps it was why she wanted him to stay, in the hope of talking away his ultimatum.

" You'll wait for some tea ? " she was saying.

" I mustn't." Sheridan shook hands and turned to Colin. " No, it's no reason you should like it. And the fact that I've stayed here for three hours is no reason why you should like me. But then I don't think you waste much time trying to find reasons for liking me ! "

V

STANDING with hand outstretched and watching the young face before him as it flushed darkly, Sheridan congratulated himself on seizing an opportunity that had almost eluded him. Colin Otway was a young man who had to be fought with the gloves off, but it was not easy to catch him unprotected by his parents and their stifling atmosphere of well-bred insincerity. If, belying the flush, he continued to keep his temper, Master Colin might score yet ; already he was saying :

" Really, Mr. Sheridan . . ."

Auriol coughed warningly and moved towards the bell.

"All right, all right ! " Sheridan laughed. " I'm accustomed to seeing things without the coloured spectacles of sentiment or self-deception. Sometimes I may be too impulsive in revealing what I see. I'm not sorry that this question should have arisen. You *do* dislike me, for a reason which I understand entirely. You have shewn it ever since you entered the house to-day ; and for some weeks before that. In your place I should dislike any one who occupied *my* place. You would be a happier man if you read in a week's time that my ship had gone down with all hands. Be honest, man ! *I* should, in your place ; and I should admit it. Well, if I don't drown, we shall meet again in six months' time. It is possible that, six months after that, you may read of my divorce. It is possible that you may then read of my re-marriage. We shan't do any good by becoming hostile at this stage. I shall tell your father what I've told Auriol and you.

It's only fair to warn you; and I'm not tying any one's hands in any way. It's possible, of course, that in six months' time everything may be over . . . I'll say good-bye."

With a smile to Auriol and a nod to Colin, Sheridan walked out of the room and let himself out of the house unattended. Though he had not waited to listen, he could not help hearing a furious "My God, Auriol!" followed by an inarticulate roar. It was answered by an exasperatingly cool:

"I really don't know."

"Have you promised . . .?"

"Darling Colin, don't shout at me! I've told you: I really don't know."

Sheridan hailed a taxi and drove to Cleveland Row On his way, he rehearsed a speech that began:

"*While I'm abroad, Laura, there's something I want you to think over. It can't be a new problem, because you must have seen that our marriage really came to an end ten years ago . . .*"

CHAPTER IV

After the Millennium

> " No, my brave thinkers, whom I recognize,
> Gladly, myself the first, as, in a sense,
> All that our world's worth, flower and fruit of man !
> Such minds myself award supremacy
> Over the common insignificance,
> When only Mind's in question,—Body bows
> To quite another government, you know.
> Be Kant crowned king o' the castle in the air !
> Hans Slouch,—his own, and children's mouths to feed
> I' the hovel on the ground,—wants meat, nor chews
> ' The Critique of Pure Reason ' in exchange."
>
> ROBERT BROWNING : *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society.*

I

ON reaching Cleveland Row, Sheridan was met by Max Hendry with a message from the Colonial Office. The *Koh-i-nor* had been chartered for the trade commission and would sail from Tilbury on the following Saturday, if Mr. Sheridan could be ready by then.

" Less than a week," Hendry pointed out in apprehension.

" It's less than a week since I gave Standish my answer," Sheridan replied.

To Hendry the words seemed rather an unnecessary piece of boastfulness, but Sheridan himself was amazed at the change that had overtaken him in five days. A week before he had filled a big position, with little reason to hope that he could magnify it and no reason at all to fear that he could jeopardize it. Now, by accepting Mr. Standish's challenge or walking into Lord Orpington's trap, he stood—as he had confessed at luncheon—to lose every ounce of present influence: if the mission failed, he would become the William Jennings Bryan of England, a golden-tongued orator with a vast following that never succeeded in thrusting him higher than the second place. If the mission succeeded, he might live to be the Roosevelt of England. Five days only had passed since he made his decision; he was not yet used to the rope-bridge that led, if only he could walk it, to his kingdom.

And less than five hours had passed since he discovered that Auriol Otway was necessary to him, less than one since he had flung down his own challenge to her family. Before the *Koh-i-nor* sailed, there was so much for him to arrange and decide that he could not determine where to begin. Livingstone must be consulted, Laura must be informed; and something must be said to Lord Otway. In addition, he must find out who had suggested this mission, who had proposed that he should take charge of it and what Standish, first, then Orpington and finally the Ferrers triumvirate expected to be the result.

"Tell the Colonial Office *I* shall be ready," he instructed Hendry; "then warn the others."

"Yes, sir. Do you want me to come, sir?"

"I can't spare you from the work here. While I'm away, I shall be entrusting very responsible duties to you. A position I've had in mind for some time. We'll discuss it later."

He passed on before the boy could waste his time with thanks. And, in truth, for him that gave and for him that received, thanks were a sorry waste of time at such a moment, as Hendry would discover if he had the wit to trace the bearing of his new, "responsible" duties on his own fortunes. He would find that he had signed his own death-warrant as a man, condemning himself to life-servitude as a private secretary, in the hour when he clave to his flesh-pots.

"A nice boy, but you can't make anything out of that stuff," Sheridan mused, with an inflamed memory of the simpering asses who had broken in on his conversation with Auriol that afternoon. In time, if indeed she now felt any tenderness, she would see that Hendry was impossible. "If he was in earnest about her or anything, he wouldn't stay on in this lap-dog position."

On reaching his workroom, he sent for his solicitor and touched up the speech that had taken shape as he returned from Manchester Square. When Livingstone arrived, he summoned his wife and her brother to hear his decision; and, to convince them all that the occasion was prosaic and their discussion a matter of unemotional business, he made known his intentions in the intervals of signing letters and interrupted himself—as in any other matter of business—when one of his secretaries came in to announce a new caller:

"Sorry to bring you all the way from the City, Livingstone. . . . Kenneth Doyle? I'll see him next, Hendry, if he can wait a few minutes . . . The next six months will give us all an opportunity for thinking calmly over something that I've had in my mind for the best part of ten years . . . Mallock? Oh, I want to see him particularly! Take him into your room, Hendry, and shew him the ropes a bit." . . .

Hendry delivered his messages and withdrew to the bare, ill-lighted box adjoining the workroom. It had been built out, he demonstrated to Mallock, as though the biggest of ordinary houses must be too small for the activities of a Sheridan; it was approached by a private staircase, as though the secretaries of a Sheridan, like the jurymen at a murder trial, must be screened from the world; it was rendered sound-proof by double-doors, as though the lightest word of a Sheridan was more secret than the whisper of an oracle; and it was furnished with a safe, a switch-board, several telephones and four un-painted tables and chairs, rather as though a Sheridan's staff had to be reminded that the great workers of the world despised the fripperies of many-coloured inks and waxes.

" He *says* he won't be long," Max reported dubiously, " but I imagine there's a fair amount of family business on hand. Mrs. Sheridan. *And* Tony. *And* Livingstone."

Mallock surveyed his surroundings with disapproval.

" 'The house with the moving walls '," he grunted.

" Moving walls ? " Max echoed.

" If you had ever seen or read a play called *Hassan* . . . But you haven't ! You are totally illiterate, Max. You sit here . . . Yes, as I thought ! Studying the acceptances for the Cambridgeshire, matching yourself against the official handicapper . . ."

" The hours are long, but there's dam' little to do," said Max.

" It's a living death ! That's why I called this room ' the house with the moving walls '. Tell me about this man Sheridan."

" He's a rum card. I don't know that I can tell you more than that."

Mallock sighed and transferred his disapproval to his companion. Though he had no concern for his friend's prospects and would have despised him if he had essayed to become a more useful member of society, he was always infuriated by Max's air of resignation, if not of contentment. Robbed of an Oxford fellowship by the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, Mallock nursed a grievance against whatever work he was compelled to do and whatever men he was given for colleagues. Shaken in health by the war and bitterly convinced that his generation had been sacrificed in a colossal futility, he was avowedly interested only in extorting from society an assured position in return for the five years of his life which society had wasted. In an age of universal plunder and scramble he maintained that men of education should be able to plunder more and to scramble higher than the unlettered herd; and, though he discouraged competition, he was annoyed when a fellow-sufferer failed to share his sour hostility.

"You haven't turned your opportunities to much account," he jeered. "If I'd been in your place, I swear I'd have been editing one of Sheridan's papers by now. From your knowledge of his private affairs, you ought to be able to screw him quite a bit."

"Not my line of country," Max answered. "I believe in obeyin' orders, usin' what intelligence God has given me . . ."

"And waiting for something to turn up! Well, if *you're* happy . . . This mission is going to be very useful to me, Max. Sheridan ain't the only realist in this house. We ought to make a strong combination."

Looking up, Max could not restrain a smile. The combination would be one between a lion and a jackal. When Geoffrey Mallock, meagre and bilious, with eye-glasses aslant and the sneer of the professional cynic, stood confronted with Sheridan's massive strength, he might see for himself the incongruity in their alliance.

"You'd better tell him that," Max suggested. "It may not have occurred to him."

"I shall," rejoined Mallock, "as soon as I'm out of this place. "'*And how,*'" he quoted, "'*shall we employ the time for our deliverance?*'

'*I*,' said Jafar, '*shall meditate upon the mutability of human affairs.*' You may cast me for Jafar, Max. I shall meditate on the rise of Sheridan and the fall of Peter Orpington. '*And I*,' said Masrar, '*shall sharpen my sword upon my thigh.*' Sheridan will play the part of Masrar, the executioner. '*And I*,' said Hassan, '*shall study the reasons of the excessive ugli-*

ness of the pattern of this carpet.' You shall be the philosophic confectioner, Max."

II

THE carpet was undeniably repellent; the room was incontestably uncomfortable. Max had to admit, however, that the bleak workroom on the other side of the double-door was no more comfortable. The barrenness, indeed, seemed to be premeditated; and, after studying Sheridan at close quarters, he had discovered an unexpected vein of childishness which, with a disabling poverty of language, he tried to explain to his caustic and voluble friend. Sheridan, so far as Max could make him out, lived in the midst of an endless, old day-dream. If in boyhood he had pictured "the great financier", "the great newspaper proprietor", "the statesman", "the superman", he must have given them the very frame that he erected later when he had blended all four characters in his own person. The sets and lighting of a film-studio accompanied him into private life, whether he was working at a trestle-table surrounded by telephones, or travelling with a portable typewriter and a vast cigar, or leaving a party to consult his tape-machine and allowing himself to be seen through an open door, with a tail of paper slowly winding round his ankles.

These effects might be designed to impress the public, but Max felt that no one had ever derived greater enjoyment out of his importance than Sheridan. Every evening and every morning the secretaries were assembled and interrogated; their work was examined and they were given their orders. If Sheridan had not already visited his offices in person, he would then convene his editors or instruct them minutely by telephone. Tony Rushforth was usually in the house about this time, gossiping with his sister to shew that, as a member of the family, he took precedence of secretaries and waiting humbly, as a member of the staff, for a summons to the presence. If high policy or the law were under discussion, Andrew Livingstone would arrive hot-foot, taking precedence of every one; and the secretaries would wearily add another hour to the time that must pass before they could go home.

With this boyish love for display was mingled a quality which Max did not try to explain. He was embarrassed, whenever Sheridan revealed it, and could never determine whether it was a streak of madness or an exhibition of bad form. Sheridan sometimes talked in a way that could only be matched by the wildest utterances of the Kaiser in the early days of the war, as though God and he were in partnership, as though—at lowest—to criticize him were blasphemy, as though he had been sent into the world to carry out God's will and to render an account of himself to God alone. It was the way, Max believed, that men talked when their minds were clouded in the first stages of general paralysis. Sheridan's mind, however, was not clouded; and this plea of responsibility to God and indifference to men was usually made when his actions had forfeited the forgiveness of men and could meet with the pardon of only a most tolerant God. In little more than a year Max had seen his chief pursuing business rivals and political opponents with a ruthlessness that was indecent. His justification, whenever he troubled to make one, was that his antagonist had obstructed something greater than the will of one man or the advantage of those whom he represented. This trait, Max decided, he would leave Mallock to discover and explain for himself.

"You'll find him rather a change after Peter Orpington," he predicted.

Mallock permitted himself an acid smile:

"A change in more ways than one. Blue Peter's a gentleman, but you'll never get very far with him."

"You'll find it awkward if Sheridan continues to let fly at Blue Peter in his papers. That is, if you're goin' back to the Colonial Office at the end of this mission."

"I shall go back," answered Mallock, "but I doubt if Blue Peter will be there at the end of the mission. That's why I'm transferring my allegiance."

Though his authorship was a well-guarded secret, Mallock rejoiced to recollect that, within an hour of being released by Lord Orpington to become general secretary to the mission, he had included him in his gallery of *Contemporary Statesmen* for the *Weekly Review.* The portrait, on which he had wasted no kindness, marked the end of a chapter; it had been conceived in a mood of nervous exasperation when Mallock could hardly decide whether to despise more the fool who helped him forward or the fool who withstood him.

"You're candid at any rate," said Max. "At the same time there *is* such a thing as loyalty."

"I've met the word, but never the quality it stands for. Blue Peter took me on because I was useful to him; I worked for him because he was useful to me."

"And if Sheridan uses you to scalp Blue Peter . . ."

"I shall be useful to Sheridan and he'll be useful to me. I shall shew him just as much 'loyalty' as he shews me."

Mallock threw himself into a chair and pulled a sheaf of manuscript pages from his pocket. The *Contemporary Portraits* must be interrupted while he was abroad; but he had found time, even before shaking hands on his new appointment, to satirize Sheridan. And the dreary interval of waiting was made almost tolerable by the thought that, when Sheridan welcomed him with conventional compliments, he would have in his pocket the draft of an article that would make Sheridan writhe in the agony of pride tormented and abased.

Max looked at his watch with impatience alien to his usually placid mood. If Sheridan did not hurry up, he would have no time to see Kenneth Doyle, nor to give Mallock his riding-orders, nor—most important of all—to elucidate the mystery of the "new, responsible duties" that were to be delegated in his absence. When his chief said that he would be prepared to sail in five days' time, Max knew from long experience that leisure would be found for the smallest detail of work and that Sheridan would arrive on board, punctually unpunctual and majestically calm, ten minutes after every one else had paraded to receive him. Max would have liked, however, to hear his fate that evening. From the beginning of their association Sheridan had been fond of displaying his power by saying: "You saw the man who just went out? The manager of my pulp-mills in Canada. He started as an office-boy"; or "That fellow came to me, not for a job, but for a pair of my old boots! He must have been about your age at the time. I saw there was something in him. Now, in a good year, he makes his fifteen thousand." For twelve months and more Max had been discouraged from thinking that a secretaryship and a salary of four hundred were the best that Sheridan could offer him; but, whenever Auriol Otway or his father discussed his prospects, Max had to admit that nothing had yet materialized. The confession caused Sir Mark to grumble that these business-men were big talkers; it prompted Auriol to wonder whether Max was really trying to improve his position.

She need wonder no more, he decided. At her birthday-party that night he would be able to say that an appointment of some kind had been promised him; and he could add that he was not, after all, being taken abroad. It was fair to assume that his headquarters would still be in London; it was reasonable to hope that the most responsible duties would allow of a week's racing at Newmarket now and again. If his new salary matched his new duties, he would—unlike his scowling companion

—feel no grievance against the fate which had sent him from Eton into the Army, mislaid him in North Russia and forgotten about him ever since.

Max stretched himself and sighed with complete contentment. He was young, healthy and in hard condition. People seemed to like him or at least to tolerate him. He danced well, played excellent bridge and had a golf-handicap of four. Though he instinctively mistrusted the man who was too good-looking or too well-dressed, he had a soldier's love for smartness and a human being's satisfaction in a personal appearance that could not be unkindly criticized. Tall and limber, with copious black hair and an olive skin, he had pragmatically decided what he required of his body and had trained his body to meet his requirements. If Sheridan tempted him to eat and drink too well, Sheridan (who surrendered to identical temptations) sweated the uric acid from his secretary's system at the same time as from his own; if Max endangered his wind by excessive smoking, he preserved it by excessive dancing. His clear eyes and happy smile supplied a physical reason for his apathetic contentment in contrast to Mallock's abiding mood of bilious universal antagonism.

"You seem to be damned pleased with yourself about something," Mallock grumbled.

"I'm pleased with life," Max answered.

"God help you! Well, if you're content to spend your days bottle-washing . . ."

"I'm not. In fact, I'm expecting a move up. Yesterday I was to *come*, to-day I'm to *stay*. Well, Sheridan's hinted for months that he's keepin' somethin' up his sleeve for me. . . . You know Miss Colthurst, don't you?" he broke off to enquire as the door opened. "Miss Colthurst is Mr. Sheridan's personal secretary," he explained in a tone designed to moderate his friend's criticism of their common employer. "Are they nearly through in there?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you," the girl answered. "Mr. Sheridan only sent for me to say he wouldn't want me any more to-day."

"Um. I'd better remind him that Doyle's still here."

While Max was out of the room, Mallock put away his manuscript and took stock of Miss Colthurst as she sat down at her table and began to rip open a pile of letters. She was pretty, in a weak, fluffy way, he decided; pink-and-white skin; staring, expressionless blue eyes; overpainted lips. Then, as she bent over her work without returning his stare, he conceived a lively detestation for her. The skirt was too short, the blouse too low; her shoes were too high, her stockings too transparent; her vivid ribbons were too visible, her musky scent or powder was all too pervasive.

Still she refused to interest herself in him.

"You coming with us on the great adventure, Miss Colthurst?" he asked.

"Pardon? Oh, yes!" she answered; and Mallock was adding gentility to the list of her surface shortcomings when Max returned.

Through the baize-covered inner door, the work-room shewed blue with cigar-smoke. Peering into the haze, Mallock could distinguish Tony Rushforth in one armchair and Andrew Livingstone in the other. Mrs. Sheridan was standing by the window; and Sheridan, his face thrown into darkness by the green shade of a reading-lamp, was at his writing-table, signing letters. The main door opened; and Kenneth Doyle was brought in. Rushforth stood up and closed the inner door. Max yawned. Miss Colthurst continued to open letters. Mallock returned, with a sardonic smile, to his portrait of Ambrose Sheridan.

After ten minutes a bell rang by Max's table.

"I can see Mallock now," said Sheridan. "I shan't want you again, Tony. You'll be here in the morning,

GIRLS CO

Livingstone." He read through and corrected a typewritten memorandum, as he spoke. "I shall want two copies of this, Hendry. The whiskey and soda, please, Hallam Those letters can go. I want you to make an appointment for me with Miles of the Board of Trade to-morrow, Hendry. Orpington has fixed his dinner for Friday. Sit down, Mallock. Lord Orpington says he can spare you if you'd like to come. This should be a great opportunity for you."

"It should be a great opportunity for us all," Mallock answered as soon as he was given a chance of speaking.

III

Action, words and setting, Max felt, had been designed for effect; and neither the effect nor the design was wasted on Mallock.

"World's workers at work," he muttered to his companion. "One: Mr. Sheridan. Does he remind you at all of m' tutor?"

In a tone similar to Sheridan's, a whiskered and spectacled house-master had chosen Mallock, twenty years before, to occupy a position of trifling responsibility and had urged him to justify his tutor's confidence.

"If we can solve a problem that has baffled every one else . . ." Sheridan began soberly.

"It's still a great opportunity, even if we can't."

A suspicion of mockery in Mallock's tone of innocent enthusiasm restrained Sheridan from pursuing his exalted generalizations.

"That's settled then? You're coming?" he asked. "Good! We'll discuss details later. Now about this dinner of Orpington's: you're organizing it? Who's coming? What does Orpington propose to say? How am I expected to reply? Formally? Or do I bring in a verdict before I've heard the evidence? Help yourself to a drink."

While he mixed himself a whiskey-and-soda, Mallock glanced at the lines of framed caricatures that covered two walls. None was flattering, few were kindly; and he experienced a brief sense of disappointment that the frames had not proved to contain vulgarly triumphant photographs of the great man receiving addresses, distributing prizes and laying foundation-stones. When he had finished his inspection, Mallock found that Sheridan had been watching him and congratulated himself that his face was suitably grave.

"I've not had all the replies, but here are some of the names," he began, pulling a crumpled list from his pocket. "I thought the dinner should be as widely representative as possible, to give you a good send-off."

Sheridan studied the list in silence and handed it back.

"I suppose Orpington won't be sorry to see the last of me, eh?" he enquired.

"He doesn't tell me his private thoughts," Mallock answered discreetly.

"It's very good of him to give us this dinner, but I really don't know why he should."

"It was my idea, sir. I reminded him that you and he hadn't always seen eye to eye."

"We've never disagreed to the point of requiring a public reconciliation," Sheridan protested.

"That was only an excuse. I wanted to make your departure as dramatic as I could. If you're going to succeed where every one else has failed, I wanted the other people to see you; and I wanted you to see the other people. I don't know how many will come, but I've invited them all, sir. Our saviours of society! Baldwin and Macdonald, George and Asquith, Balfour and Grey, Birkenhead and Churchill, Northumberland and Snowden. I've asked the literary people, too; Wells and Galsworthy and Shaw . . . And the newspaper men: Rothermere and Beaverbrook . . . Business men: McKenna, Geddes . . . The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dean Inge, Old uncle Tom Cobleigh and all . . ."

The sudden lapse into flippancy brought a smile to Sheridan's face; and Mallock, observing the smile, relaxed his former gravity and prepared to test his new chief with an exhibition of candour that might establish them for all time as men with no pretences to keep up.

"Saviours of society?" Sheridan repeated.

"It's the name I give to all our public men since the war," Mallock explained contemptuously. "A novelist is no longer content to write novels: he must save society or die—as a novelist—in the attempt. I've invited the leaders of every school that has a plan for making this one small island a safe and happy place to live in! Nothing more! No Wellsian Utopia, where your clothes are taken away on arrival and you spend the rest of a prolonged life stark naked, carrying out experiments with test-tubes. You'd hardly call England a safe place now, sir. Well, all these people have had a try. They've all failed. They all know they've failed. They believe you'll fail and they know you believe you won't. I thought it would amuse you to meet them."

Sheridan sipped his whiskey-and-soda reflectively and tossed his cigar-case across the table to Mallock. His expression and gesture were those of a man tossing pennies to a street musician whose voice had proved less excruciating than he feared. As Mallock cut his cigar, Sheridan opened his lips to ask if he too thought this mission would fail; but Mallock, on the briefest acquaintance, did not seem the breed of rat to join a sinking ship. Instead, he asked whether Lord Orpington was arranging an impressive despatch for a man whom he expected to see joining the swollen ranks of the unsuccessful saviours of society.

"Orpington's quite frank," answered Mallock. "He doesn't believe you or any one can do much good; but, if you think otherwise, he can't take the responsibility of refusing you your chance."

"And he can afford to give a dinner to a man he's not going to see for six months."

"I don't think he was trying to get rid of you, sir. I was with him when Lord Otway made the suggestion . . ."

Sheridan could not listen to the end of the sentence until he had adjusted his equation to a new and most unexpected factor. It was Otway, then, who had put this idea into Orpington's head, urging that, whether or no the mission were fruitful, at least the Colonial Office would be left in peace for six months. Presumably he had not mentioned that Manchester Square would be left in peace for the same period. It was an ingenious move, Sheridan thought; and it revealed, more clearly than Lady Otway's sly digs or Colin's open antagonism, the instinctive dread, like that of a horse for a snake, which this family entertained for him.

"I like to know where I am," said Sheridan, more to himself than to Mallock.

Easy or brief the struggle was not likely to be; but none of the struggles by which he had attained his present position could be called brief or easy. Auriol herself had still to be won: he could not rely on a schoolgirl's admiration if the schoolgirl lost her heart to a good-looking boy of her own class. And Auriol's mother and father, her brother and brothers-in-law and sisters had to be defied and beaten: there was no hope of winning them. And then Laura had to be coerced; and Tony silenced; and Livingstone overborne.

Looking across to the chair which his wife had occupied, Sheridan observed a crumpled handkerchief on the floor. This was going to be a grimmer struggle than he had anticipated; and it was only part of the greater struggle which he had been carrying on all his life. The Orpingtons were fighting as hard to keep him out of power as the

Otways to keep him out of their family. If he ever held office, it would only be because the Orpingtons and Standishs were afraid to withhold it any longer. Young Mallock might talk about unsuccessful "saviours of society", collecting them for dinner as a cynical object-lesson in the forces which a Sheridan must expect to find opposing him, but these people would rather stand between society and salvation than allow salvation to come by such a saviour.

"After half-a-dozen years of the millennium," Mallock was saying, "people are wondering if they're any better off than before the war. They find they're not. Smaller security and greater discomfort; harder work and less pay. That's the present state of society in spite of all our saviours. And they've all had a try. Liberal, labour, conservative, non-party. They've talked and written and prayed and preached till the gunpowder ran out of the heels of their boots."

"*We're* both of us better off than if there'd been no war," Max pointed out with disconcerting candour. "You'd have bin starvin' at the bar; and I should be sellin' tips in sealed envelopes outside the Silver Ring."

"You and I can pull a few strings," Mallock retorted. "We've dropped into jobs till the next war or the social revolution; but the mob that's ready to work and wants regular pay and has no particular quarrel with any one—nine hundred and ninety-nine out of a thousand in this country!—what have the medicine-men done for them? They've crippled the minority to demoralize the majority, without giving security to either. And these are the best brains in England! . . . Charming old gentlemen! So white-haired and distinguished. Full of the precedents established by Mr. Gladstone. They're all dead, though nobody's remembered to bury them! The war they couldn't prevent has created a world they can't control.

Society won't be saved by men who won't recognize the new world."

"And you think that I . . . ?" Sheridan began with a close-lipped smile.

"I don't think, I don't know, I don't care," Mallock answered. "It won't matter if we fail. What matters will be if we're found out. I think we should be able to provide against that. No use in a private press, otherwise. I said it was a rare opportunity for us all, but, if we don't get away with even the appearance of success, we shan't be worthy of it."

As though he had not heard the last words, Sheridan leaned forward and drew a pile of typewritten letters towards him.

"Does Orpington think I'm going to fail?" he asked.

"He hasn't said so to me, sir," Mallock answered. "You were asking what was expected of you on Friday. I don't think anything in particular is expected. There's a lot of curiosity among the people who don't know you. A lot of hostility among the labour people you've downed and the tories who think you're waiting to down them . . ."

"But no confidence that I may succeed where these people—what did you call them? The saviours of society?—have failed?"

"I've no doubt there's plenty of confidence in the country," Mallock answered discreetly. "You would hardly expect it at a dinner like this."

IV

His air of discretion was blown away by the first breeze that met him as he opened the front door. Ambrose Sheridan, at close quarters, seemed even cruder than he had imagined at a distance; and he hurried gleefully back to his chambers in the hope of fixing the new impression before the last of his *Contemporary Statesmen* was required by the printers.

"*The direst disappointment of my life,*" he began with affected wistfulness, "*is that I have as yet received no summons to the dinner which the Earl of Orpington is giving to Mr. Sheridan. A professional student of politics, as ever grappling with the question* 'How Does It Seem to a Contemporary?' *finds himself excluded from a gathering where he might reasonably hope for light on political problems that threaten to baffle posterity. As my readers are aware, Lord Orpington, on behalf of the government, is entertaining the Sheridan Trade Commission to dinner. There is to be a reception, to which I understand 'every one who is any one' has been bidden; the list of guests will no doubt be published next day about the time that Mr. Sheridan is making his last dispositions before leaving. This much will be available for the historian; and it is hardly to be feared that the photographers who dog the Trade Commission's steps will be too much occupied elsewhere to obtain and distribute the last memorial that we shall enjoy for many months: Mr. Sheridan shaking hands with the colonial secretary and promising to return as soon as possible, Lord Orpington begging Mr. Sheridan not to return on* his *account, the prime minister protesting that they will rub along somehow without him and Mr. Sheridan patiently reminding us all that no one can get on without him for long. This too will be preserved for the historian, but what will he make of it? What do Mr. Sheridan's contemporaries make of our queer ways with men of destiny? The facts of Mr. Sheridan's life are sufficiently well known and it would be alien to his open nature if he had ever discouraged the legitimate curiosity of the public about himself. At an age when most men are struggling to keep soul and body together, Mr. Sheridan was a millionaire. One readier than I with an atlas would be required to put a finger on that part of the world in which he has not at some time made a fortune; and in his early prime he was free to bring all his energy and experience to the dreary* *tangle in which our public life had become involved. He was a business man—he has said so himself—and he asked only that the empire should be run on business lines. The successor to Mr. Horatio Bottomley, the forerunner of Sir Eric Geddes, a potential ally of both, he was deflected from his destiny by our late unhappy differences with Germany and by his own conviction that, in a war which sucked in the trained man of business no less inexorably than the trained soldier, his place was in the trenches. If any one has forgotten his appearance, in a private's uniform, in the House of Commons, a halting memory can be jogged by more than one lucky photograph and more than a thousand columns of the experiences, reflections and moral lessons which he extracted from the war. I seem to have been by Corporal Sheridan's side when he went overseas; his first photographs after being granted a commission are as familiar as those which were taken when he returned home a lieutenant-colonel with a D.S.O. In four and a half years of war nothing was ever allowed to come between Mr. Sheridan and the camera.*

"The war, of course, came between us and a business government; but, when the gallant lieutenant-colonel unbuckled his sword, he beat it into a ploughshare with all the pent fever of long delay. That the furrow was lonely as that ploughed by Lord Rosebery mattered nothing to one who must plough or die; and to plough the sand was better than nothing. It was all ploughing; it was in the right direction; and the soil turned by his unwearying coulter resembled curiously and touchingly the ropes of sand which bound him to his political associates. At one period Mr. Sheridan called for a national party and urged that reconstruction should be as far removed from party politics as had been the war. By a happy coincidence, the national policy for a national party coincided with Mr. Sheridan's own; and those who differed from him had to bear the responsibility of placing party interests above national needs. That

responsibility they seem to have accepted; and the national party remained a party of one in the obdurate days of coalition and conservative rule. With the advent of Mr. Macdonald, I understand that Mr. Sheridan was prepared to beat his ploughshare back into a sword if labour, in return, would only follow his punctual admonishments. So much advice was being offered at this time that the labour leaders can hardly be blamed for not following it all; for rejecting it, however, they paid the penalty of incurring Mr. Sheridan's displeasure. The shortest memory can hardly have forgotten the remorseless blows of his criticism; and, if the man who could form a new ministry had not been preferred to the lonely ploughman who had uprooted the old, Mr. Sheridan would have reaped his reward by being summoned to Buckingham Palace.

" It is here that the historian most blindly gropes. Natural enough, he may say, that the king should send for the leader of the opposition; but most unnatural that Mr. Standish, in distributing portfolios, should not find one for his doughty if irregular ally. Perhaps it was offered and declined. Perhaps it was not offered. Old entanglements with liberalism and labour may have been inconveniently remembered; or Mr. Sheridan may have clung to his independence. Who shall say? History will record that the man who made straight Mr. Standish's path to office never trod it in his company.

" Strange! And yet less strange than what follows. For more years than one likes to remember and whatever the more immediate cause, government after government has tottered and fallen through its inability to cure the unemployment produced by the war. Before Mr. Standish had been in the saddle a week, careful observers of the obvious pointed out that the unemployed were still with us; within the last few months Mr. Standish made the discovery for himself. What England thinks to-day, our unhurried prime minister may normally begin to think in a year's

time; for once, however, he has acted with Lloyd-Georgian rapidity and decision. Word is brought of a new prophet, who has been curing unemployment for uncounted years on every page of his numerous papers. 'Mr. Ambrose Sheridan! "He knows about it all! He knows! He knows!" *Then let him cure it! Let him form his commission of enquiry, let him explore the empire! Let him do what he will so long as he goes away and stays away!'*

"*Will the historian read this sinister motive into our simple prime minister's mind? There is a parallel: when Nicias wearied of hearing what Cleon would do if he were commander-in-chief, he retorted 'Well, do it!' And Cleon took command. Mr. Sheridan is pledged to find a policy for the government which has found no place for him. Should he fail, Mr. Standish is at least secured against his most formidable rival; should he succeed, the government will have a policy. Well, Downing Street is worth a dinner. And it may be hoped that the Sheridan press will be silent for at least six months. After that?*

"*I wonder if the historian is justified in putting on Mr. Sheridan's grimly smiling lips: 'After that, I come in'? What if Cleon, in modern parlance, should 'deliver the goods'? Will there still be no place in Mr. Standish's ministry for the man who put the ministry in power and supplied it with a policy? If any place, what place—ultimately—but the first place?*

"*One would give much to see these Titans meeting urbanely round Lord Orpington's hospitable board. One would give more to see inside their heads.*"

V

At about the time when Mallock was writing the first word of his article, Sheridan was signing the last of his letters.

Lying back in his chair, he reviewed the events of the day. Less than twelve hours had passed since he read

Auriol's note, less than ten since he had seen clearly for the first time after months of twilight groping. Laura now knew his decision, though she made no more comment on it than if he had announced his decision to spend Christmas in the moon: either she did not understand or she did not believe, though he had carefully begun by pointing out that their marriage was now dead in all but name. Livingstone knew and—characteristically! —was reserving judgement till required to give it in six months' time. Tony Rushforth knew and knew also that it was foolish for him to cry before he was hurt: nothing would be decided for six months; and, whatever happened, the most liberal provision would be made for his sister. The Otways knew. Auriol knew. There was nothing more for him to do unless he tried again to make poor Laura grasp the meaning of plain English.

He was moving reluctantly to the door when Miss Colthurst came in with a pile of marked evening papers.

"Oh, didn't you get my message?" he asked. "I said, an hour ago, that you could go home."

"I wanted to tell you that I'd seen mother," the girl answered. "She says I *can* come."

Sheridan nodded and looked thoughtfully at the eager, smiling face before him. Evelyn Colthurst was only a year or two older than Auriol, but no one who saw the flushed cheeks and bright eyes would think of her as being cold or not yet awakened.

"It will be a great experience for you, if I can arrange it," he told her.

"Oh, but you *said* . . ."

"All the arrangements are provisional at present." Some time, he reflected, this girl would have to be told in a formula hallowed by repetition, that everything—as he supposed she knew—must have an end. If he had talked to Auriol two days before, he would probably have ended everything then, without suggesting that Evelyn should travel with him. He could make the mission an excuse for ending things now, but he had never contemplated spending six months without a companion of any kind. That much even Auriol had no right to demand, especially if she were going to say that she wanted more time to think or that she could not go against her parents. He was leaving her free for six months; and for six months his private life was no one else's business. "Have you begun to get your outfit?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, *unless* anything unforeseen turns up . . . It will be a great experience," he repeated. "You will need to be very discreet. Run along now! I've a lot of things to discuss with my wife."

CHAPTER V

A Martyr in Spite of Herself

"... Alack, one lies oneself
Even in the stating that one's end was truth,
Truth only, if one states as much in words!"
ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society.*

I

BY a family tradition dating back at least to the childhood of Colin, the younger Otways were privileged on their birthdays to assume, within the limits of reason, absolute control over the house in which they happened to be for those pregnant four-and-twenty hours. They ordered their own meals, they arranged their own parties, they invited their own friends. By courtesy and convention the dictator of the day found room for any parents or sisters who chanced to be accessible, but no pressure was applied and no rights claimed. On the night of his youngest daughter's twenty-second birthday, Lord Otway was obliged to visit her in her room and to enquire if his wife and he were expected at dinner.

"But of course, darling!" Auriol assured him. "You're taking in Mildred Killarney. Mummie has the duke. I've given myself Sir John Ferrers ..."

"Have you invited the entire cabinet?" asked her father, holding out his hand for her list. "Rodney, Ferrers, Avonmouth ... I hope Avonmouth will keep reasonably sober. Geoffrey Mallock, Max ... I'm glad you're including a few people of approximately your own age ..."

" My dear, it's a positive children's party ! " Auriol answered. " Colin. Bobbie Selhurst and Winifred. Guy and Philip. I must be allowed to have a *few* of my own friends."

" Your own friends always seem to be about twice your age."

" Because people of my own age are so woefully uninteresting. Poor darlings, it isn't their fault : they've not had time to *do* anything. About forty people of my own age burst in here this afternoon when I wanted to hear Mr. Sheridan on his mission. It was like a monkey-house ! "

Lord Otway surrendered the dinner-list and looked to see what Auriol was reading. It was Lanciani's *Ruins and Excavations* ; and her choice reminded him that in a week's time she would be safely in Rome, though even there she was more likely to be bearding Signor Mussolini than seeing the usual sights and enjoying the gaieties which the ambassador was arranging for her.

" I sometimes wonder, Auriol," he ventured, " if you don't miss something by being so much older than your years."

" But I adore all the usual things ! Hunting, dancing, parties ! In moderation, though. Thanks to you and mummie, we know a lot of rather wonderful people. I should never forgive myself later on if I'd wasted the chance of talking, say, to Mr. Sheridan in order to do cross-word puzzles with Winifred Selhurst."

It was the second time she had mentioned this ominous name in two minutes ; and Lord Otway wondered in sudden alarm whether Rome would be in time to protect her. Though she had been by herself since tea, she had only reached the fourth page of Lanciani ; and, when he came in, she was staring out of the window with clouded eyes.

" It would be more normal," he suggested. "And, the older I get, the more I believe in sticking to the normal. If you do what every one else does, what the world for many generations has approved, you won't go far wrong."

"You also won't go very far," Auriol predicted. "Every one that's ever done anything has broken away from the normal. A man like Mr. Sheridan: well, he was saying to-day that he began by running away to sea, then he deserted from his ship . . ."

"By the way, did he tell you when he was sailing?" Lord Otway interrupted. Auriol shook her head; and he braced himself to attack an influence that was threatening to become an obsession. "Auriol, my dear, we always discuss everything very frankly. I hadn't meant to speak about this, but from something that Colin let fall after tea . . ."

He stopped as Auriol threw her head back and faced him with dangerously bright eyes.

"Let's have him in here," she suggested. "If he has anything to say, he'd better say it before me . . ."

"I think he's with your sisters . . ."

"Let's have them too. And mummie. And Guy and Philip . . ."

"My dear, how can it possibly be any affair of theirs?" asked Lord Otway, forgetting to mention, perhaps failing to recall, that, when Joyce and Imogen first brought this unhappy entanglement to his notice, they dragged their reluctant husbands as additional witnesses to what "everybody" must be seeing, saying and thinking.

"It depends what they've been told. Perhaps, if they hear what happened and not what Colin, who wasn't present at the time, *thinks* must have happened . . ."

She threw herself into a chair, running impatient fingers through the gleaming waves of her chestnut hair.

"You've not heard what I was going to say," Lord Otway remonstrated mildly.

Auriol's impatient shrug warned him that the time for hints and half-truths was over. With varying degrees of delicacy and an unvarying sense of embarrassment, they had all of them essayed a diplomatic approach. At one time he had deplored the comments that were made on his own niece for being seen so much in the brilliant and dissolute company of Lord Avonmouth, who was notoriously living apart from his wife. Auriol, if she heard the parable, drew no moral from it. After that, Imogen had handed on the question of an unnamed friend who wanted to know what Auriol and Mr. Sheridan could have in common to make them inseparable. Joyce had recommended that, if an obviously innocent friendship was not to become furtive, Auriol should invite Mr. Sheridan to Manchester Square. Colin, adopting direct action, constituted himself her chaperon whenever his engagements at the Staff College permitted. Up to the present, however, no one had put into definite language a rebuke or a complaint or a charge; and Lady Otway at least was of opinion that, when people defined their meanings, they always said more than they meant.

"As Sheridan is going away for six months," Lord Otway persisted with a desperate smile that attempted to melt Auriol's grimness, " I was only going to warn you against the dangers of excessive hero-worship. You're so enthusiastic, Auriol, over the people who ' do things', you're so generous in your appreciation . . ."

" We can discuss that some other time," she interrupted.

" Naturally, your enthusiasm calls forth an echo . . . Sheridan is a case in point. He told me to-day that you were the most brilliant girl he'd ever met. Well, as I said, he's going away for six months . . ."

" So you want to know how I shall behave in six months' time, when he comes back ? I can't tell you ! *He* wanted to know ; and I couldn't tell *him*. He wants to divorce his wife and marry me, daddy ; and I'm to tell him, when he comes back, what I think about it. Bit of a bombshell, wasn't it? I shall want the best part of six months to get over the shock! . . . I don't know what Colin 'let fall', but, from what I know of him, I should think it was a large-size brick. You see, though, daddy, it isn't a question of hero-worship or of my 'getting myself talked about', as Colin would say. And, the sooner every one recognizes that, the better. A little realism, to use one of Mr. Sheridan's words. Where's the council meeting? In the drawing-room?"

II

THE family was still in session when Auriol, who had played a silent part for most of the time, intervened to remind the others that her guests would be arriving in twenty minutes' time.

"I hope I don't have *many* birthdays like this," she added with a sigh.

For a moment she had hesitated on the brink of saying "*I hope I don't* live *to have many birthdays like this*," but, though she was by now furiously angry, she would not cheapen herself with vague invocations of death or threats of suicide.

"I said at the beginning that we shouldn't do any good by talking," murmured Lady Otway.

The heels of her words were trampled fiercely under foot by her children:

"That's all very well, mummie . . ."

"I've said it before and I say it again. If that fellow sets foot in this house . . ."

"I don't know what's come over you, Auriol . . ."

"Let them talk! It may prevent a stroke . . ."

Lord Otway, rising mechanically like the top of a safety-valve whenever a new explosion threatened, once more demonstrated that Auriol was going abroad immediately for two months, Sheridan for six. It was no use for anybody to meet trouble half-way, he told his elder daughters.

" That's all very well," Imogen began again.

" You can't possibly just let things drift," said Joyce, with the impatience of one who knew that this was certainly what both her parents proposed to do.

Uninvited, her two sisters followed Auriol to her room with affectionate remonstrances that were not the less galling for their incompleteness. "Auriol dear, I don't want to say anything against a man who's a friend of yours." . . . " Darling, if it was only what *we* said, it wouldn't matter so much." . . . Lady Otway came in to see that Auriol was not bullied by the others ; Colin followed to be sure that the others were not bullied by Auriol. Lord Otway, watch in hand, hesitated by the open door.

With her back to the family, Auriol fingered the dress which her maid had put out for her. She was in no danger of crying, but she would lose control of her temper if this inquisition went on much longer. Everybody was browbeating her for something she had never said, something she had never done, something she did not even begin to understand. In the five hours that had passed since Mr. Sheridan blurted out so surprisingly that he was in love with her, no one had given her five minutes to consider whether she was in love with him, whether the help and inspiration she could bring him transcended personal questions of liking or disliking, whether she would share the responsibility of his divorce by marrying him afterwards. They all assumed she was in love ; they assumed that she wanted to break Mrs. Sheridan's heart from sheer spite and to disgrace the family from whimsical perversity.

" We've never had a thing of this kind before. . ." Colin was reiterating grimly.

Auriol turned from the dress to the stockings and shoes that went with it. A reply of any kind would stimulate him to rehearse the characteristics and history of the Otways through a dozen blameless generations. She would be reminded superfluously of their common aim and common sacrifices. Ever since he himself succeeded, Lord Otway had worked and worried to hand the business over to Colin as a going concern. The house and lands at Lokshott were settled in reasonable time to escape death-duties; and the family existed economically in Manchester Square for most of the year, on the fees which their father earned as a director. By degrees the encumbrances were being paid off, but, when Joyce and Imogen married, they were given only their clothes and the promise of a third share under their father's insurance-policy. Cavaly and Wainwright, whose families were chained to Lokshotts of their own, accepted their lot uncomplainingly: as younger sons they knew what was expected of them; as young men with sisters of their own, they realized that the women had been sacrificed in order that they themselves might be sent into the Household Cavalry, but all this was in the established tradition. The Otway inheritance must be kept intact; the Otway name must remain untarnished. Auriol herself had been so well schooled that she never questioned her father's dispensation. A time might come when England outgrew her great houses, as she had outgrown her border-castles; primogeniture might go by the board; daughters and sons might inherit equally and mate freely. Until that day dawned, however, she recognized loyally what was expected of her; and she could not bear to have it stated for her in the form of a lecture by Colin.

"Sorry if you all think I'm going to let you down," she muttered.

A faint quaver brought Lady Otway to the rescue of her youngest child.

"I think you're all being very hard on poor little

Auriol," she remonstrated. "I trusted all of you when you were her age . . ."

"You'd better not trust *me*, though," Auriol broke out. One kind voice was enough to sap all her resistance. "A little more of this; and I elope with the sweep, if he turns out to be an eligible young bachelor . . ."

"If he isn't, you can wait six months while he gets a divorce," Colin muttered with venom.

Auriol crossed to her brother's side and patted his back:

"Well done, Colin! It was rather spiteful and not very witty, but it's done the trick. It's made me angry; and now I don't care what I do. Listen to me, darlings! I've told you exactly four million and three times what Mr. Sheridan—I still call him that!—what he said to me and what I said to him. Whether I've promised anything, *I don't know*, as I told you, Colin. I shouldn't care, if I had, because I was too much surprised to know what was happening. But I know and I promise you this: I shall do just what I like without caring a snap of the fingers for any of you. I was quite ready *not* to meet Mr. Sheridan till you took it on yourself to forbid me, Colin: now I shall meet him morning, noon and night till he sails. I'm not going to Italy, mummie. Is there anything else? Oh, I shall write to him as often as I have anything to say. And, if he wants to marry me when he comes back, I shall give the matter my best consideration. This charming little family difference started in my room downstairs, I believe; we continued it in the drawing-room, up the stairs and into my bedroom. May I request the male members of the family to withdraw for about five minutes, as I don't like undressing in public? Thank you, darlings! You won't be late for dinner, will you? It's 'poor little Auriol's' birthday-party!"

In spite of the warning, her mother and sisters lingered on, the one to curb the others. Joyce Cavaly fidgeted with the brushes and bottles on the dressing-table, occasionally looking up to catch a mortifying glimpse of her own usually gentle face, now flushed and temporarily disfigured with anger. Imogen Wainwright sighed, raised her eyebrows, shrugged her shoulders and sighed again. Lady Otway sat with folded hands in the one armchair.

"I suppose this is the result of Cambridge . . ." ran one mutter.

Imogen knew Cambridge only as a tourist in vacation, but the men of the family in which she was bred and those of the family into which she had married were agreed that "the modern girl" was the creation of a "feminist" movement originating in the universities and spreading disastrously to all girls' schools.

"If you cared for him, I could make allowances . . ." ran another.

Joyce had no toleration to spare for breaches of the marriage-law, but a favourite Cavaly girl had run away with a married man; and the family had to decide whether to ostracize the delinquent or to justify the delinquency.

"I care for his *brain*," Auriol answered. "And that's all. Or it *was* all till this evening. You're making me in love with him against my will. You're shewing me the imbecile prejudice he's had to fight against all his life."

"I thought him singularly attractive at luncheon," drawled Lady Otway. "I believe he has genius. If I were quite sure he hadn't, I should want to marry him myself. But it's a mistake for ordinary people, however gifted, to marry geniuses. Remember that when the time comes for you to decide, Auriol. Meanwhile, don't pay any attention to what other people say. They don't know anything more about life than you do. Come along, Joyce."

III

When at last she had her room to herself, Auriol pressed her hands to her head and gazed despairingly at the clock.

There was no time to think now. Her guests would be arriving any minute; and she must be ready to talk coherently. Max Hendry had to be thanked for the cocktail-shaker; the Duke of Killarney for a basket of orchids. She must find out from Max whether he was going with the Sheridan mission; perhaps she could discover his unprejudiced opinion of Mr. Sheridan.

Who else was coming? Sir John Ferrers, well primed with amusing gossip from the Foreign Office; Lord Orpington? No, he had failed her and was sending Bobbie Selhurst in his place. Bobbie and Lady Winifred, who must be set at once to retrieve poor Colin's lost temper for him. As every one knew, Colin was—in his steely, reserved way—head over ears in love with Winifred Selhurst and was only waiting for a staff appointment; how would he have acted, how talked if Winifred had already been married to a man who made her wretched, a man who was only in name her husband?

"Who else?" Auriol asked herself.

She had collected a quiverful of politicians, partly because she had been brought up amongst them, partly because they—unlike the hunting and shooting breed of soldier whom her sisters had married—seemed pre-eminently men who "did things". Who else? There was Bertram Fortescue, the novelist, Macklin the portrait-painter, both rather suspect to Colin for the reason that she had invited them: they both "did things". Eagerly and shamelessly Auriol had collected the men who painted her favourite pictures and wrote her favourite books; and Colin was now reconciled to them as to harmless and ingenious animals that he had not before encountered. For all the flavour of Bohemianism attaching to Fortescue, Colin would not mind her marrying him. Mrs. Fortescue had died a dozen years before. It was only when a marriage continued in name when it was dead in fact . . .

Auriol forced her mind back to the party. Sir John Ferrers, if any one, was the man to tell her about the genesis of the mission and to confirm her suspicion that the cabinet was plotting to get Mr. Sheridan abroad and to keep him abroad till he had dissipated his formidable popularity. Did any of them realize that he might return a bigger man than he had set out?

She had half thought of inviting him to her party and had decided against it because she was sure he would be bored with an assembly of relations and old family-friends. Reviewing the party in prospect and trying to fit him into it, she was glad that she had resisted the impulse. In some way he would have produced a feeling of tension; the others would have been opposed to him in outlook; the table would have divided into antagonistic camps. Would it always be like this? Must they always creep through life in parallel ruts? Would a Max Hendry always say: "*Wonderful animal! Not in the stud-book, of course . . .*"

And what did it matter if he did? What, in his own wretched parlance, availed a line in the stud-book if you could not win races? The Killarneys and Otways and Hendrys might include a remote Sheridan in their pedigree; but, when you came down to facts, they were giving themselves ridiculous airs on the strength of a traceable strain and a recognizable action, when Mr. Sheridan could beat the whole field over any one of a dozen distances. They should feel honoured that he spared time to associate with them. And she should feel more than honoured that he admired her.

Pausing in the midst of her hurried undressing, Auriol analysed herself in the hope of finding how she attracted him. She was young, slight and clean-limbed, with the white skin demanded of chestnut hair. Her neck and breasts were finely modelled; her head well-poised; her features sharply, almost too sharply, chiselled. So far, so good; but she was always the first to admit that Imogen, with her perfection and harmony, outclassed her in looks. And Joyce outclassed them both in charm. None the less, when her sisters came into a room, Auriol knew that Mr. Sheridan never turned his head. Was it her intelligence, her vitality or her mere youth that captivated him? In intelligence she rated herself above the average; and she was too young to have become devitalized; but she possessed no quality in the superlative degree.

It was really difficult, she decided with a last look at her reflection, not to feel that England must be congested with her doubles!

"*My dear, this can't go on! Don't you know I'm in love with you?*"

Too much startled at the time for any other emotion, she now recalled Mr. Sheridan's working lips and damp forehead as he declared himself. He was like . . . Auriol did not know *what* he was like! A lion begging her not to hurt him? A man, a mature man . . . Simply by being herself, she had thrown a mature man out of his stride. Was this abnormal susceptibility in one man, or had she the power to unbalance all men? The question had never suggested itself to her, but, as she ran down to the drawing-room, she experienced a new, intoxicating desire to test Sheridan by other men and to test other men by their reaction to her. If she could stir Sir John Ferrers from his preoccupation with himself, or Max Hendry from his bovine placidity . . .

"Max, I want to thank you for your adorable present!" she exclaimed, as soon as she had acknowledged a storm of good wishes.

"Feelin' any older?" he asked.

"Appallin'ly. Can't stoop down to pick up your g's in the way I once did. I can still read big print without usin' glasses, though. When are you off, Max?"

"I'm not. Don't come under starter's orders." Looking round the room, he lowered his voice. "I can't tell you anything about it yet, but Sheridan dropped me a hint this afternoon that he had something on ice for me."

"I hope he has. It's about time."

"Well, don't say it as though it were *my* fault! I've done all I was told since I went to him; and one of the things he told me to do was to sit tight while he looked round for a better job. *Now* . . . Remember this time three years ago, Auriol?"

Three years ago she was going up to Cambridge for the first time. The adventure of life was beginning; and she had never imagined that it could land her, through no fault of hers, in a position where one man talked of divorcing his wife to marry her and the family mobilized against her and everybody was within an inch of not being on speaking terms with anybody else. Life became complicated, as one grew up; but, until one grew up, it could hardly be called life. To-day, for the first time, she was getting to grips with reality.

"Three years . . . ?" she echoed, as Max seemed to be waiting for an answer.

"I'd just come back to England . . ."

"Oh, yes! You were being rather tragic and tiresome because nobody loved you and you couldn't find anything to do. The unappreciated hero. I'm glad you've got over that stage."

"It was all thanks to you," he answered.

"But you don't seem to like the job I found you."

"It was good enough to mark time in, but you couldn't marry and settle down on it. I'm a domestic sort of cove under a rough exterior . . ."

"*You?* My dear, you *deceive* yourself! If ever there was a born bachelor . . ."

"You didn't think that three years ago."

IV

AURIOL checked with a thrill of excitement to note an abrupt alteration of tone. The banjo had been discarded for the guitar; and Max was changing from rag-time to a serenade. Three years ago they had had a tremendous affair, she and Max: he had proposed to her, she had accepted him; a ring was to be bought after the next Newmarket meeting, when he was confident of finding winners, and they would have published the engagement if Lord Otway had not ordered them to be sensible.

"What fun it was!" she laughed. "And darling father took it so seriously!"

"Didn't *you?* *I* did."

"Max! My dear, pull yourself together! I was just nineteen, just going up to Cambridge. You weren't much older, with no visible means of support. '*Prisoner, when arrested, described himself as a regular follower of racing . . .*'"

"But you said you'd marry me as soon as I had enough to run the show," he persisted.

"As soon as we both saw a cow jumping over the moon! The Greek Kalends! As soon as a new age of miracles dawned!"

Max faced her with the humility of one whose many friends never grudged the trouble of pointing out his limitations:

"You made up your mind I was hopeless?"

"*It,* not *you.* I shouldn't be so rude! And it *was* pretty hopeless, wasn't it? That was three years ago, Max, and we haven't made much progress since. I don't know how much *longer* . . ."

"You're to wait? I never asked you to wait five minutes. You said you would, but I told you it wouldn't be fair. All I ask is that you shan't declare a forfeit if I *do* tell you my luck's turned."

Auriol found her truculence ebbing. Mr. Sheridan was not the only man she could infatuate at will, but a twinge of conscience at the sight of Max's humble constancy kept her from enjoying this new proof of power. He was too loyal a friend to be dangled on a string.

"Don't let's discuss it till there's something to discuss," she whispered. "I want to know what the new job is."

"I haven't been told yet. He has so many irons in the fire. If I had my choice . . ."

As he began to build castles in the air, Auriol allowed her attention to wander. What was her present attitude to Max? However important he had seemed in the days when she thought it would be exciting for her to be engaged, he was now, in some way, ceasing to matter. That being so, it was always better to end things good-humouredly. She would have felt happier, in her present quagmire of uncertainty, if she could have been sure that she had ended anything: from his tone, Max seemed to feel that they were standing where they had stood three years before. At the same time, if he asked her with his embarrassing bluntness whether she wished to say good-bye, she would want to keep him. It was extraordinary how few men were content with friendship; and it was extraordinary how almost underhand women had to become in struggling with men in their "marriage-or-nothing", "take-it-or-leave-it" moods. While Max talked, with the frantic certainty of the gambler, about the work he would like, the work Sheridan could give him, the work he almost fancied had already been given him, Auriol tried to imagine what she would say if he reminded her again of her old promise. "*Touchin' the age of miracles, it's dawned all right. Cows jumpin' over the moon in all directions. What about it?*"

Throwing her head up suddenly, with the impatient fling which she could never control, Auriol found that she was being watched from three sides: by her mother, philosophically; by her father, in perplexity; by Imogen and Joyce, with reproach in their gentle eyes. Colin she could not see, but she could imagine an expression of dour resolution on his fleshless, red face. The family, she reflected bitterly, would welcome Max with outstretched hands: the man who had saved her from making a fool of herself with Sheridan. They understood Max, who with a change of name might have bartered identities with Guy or Philip or Colin himself; they knew on what page of what books to find him. Money apart, they would say, she had done well in marrying him ("*one of the Suffolk Hendrys. He's the heir to the baronetcy. A very useful polo-player. Plenty of ability if he'd only use it. Straight as they're made. Not bad-looking in a narrow-faced, lanky, Spanish way. Any woman who married him would know where she was, if you understand what I mean*").

As a husband, Auriol conceded, Max would be trustworthy and affectionate. He would also be entirely commonplace and uninspiring. Ten years hence, her parents would no doubt be giving a similar party, to Colin and his safe, stereotyped wife, whoever she might be; to Joyce and Imogen, with their standardized husbands; to Max and herself. Most of the servants would be the same. A coat of paint every few years would keep the room unchanged. Everything would be inexpressibly draught-proof and cosy. Then, as now, Colin would be laying down the law about "communists" as his father had laid it down about "radicals," his grandfather about "liberals". Sir John Ferrers or his spiritual successor would be dividing men into "live wires" and "revolutionaries", "soldiers of fortune" and "men who've made their way to the top by their own unaided ability", according to the side of the House on which they sat.

Perhaps some one, mentioning Sheridan, would ventilate the room innocuously with a breath of vicarious adventure. *"Amazing career that fellow's had!"* By then it would be safe for any one to say: *"D'you remember the passion he had for* you, *Auriol?"* It would perhaps not be so safe for her to remember that she might have been blown along by the full gale of adventure if she had cared to fight her family.

"God knows I'm not out for love in a cottage," Max was saying. "That may be all right in a novel . . ."

In a novel or play, Auriol had to confess, pursuing her own thoughts, no girl of spirit would hesitate. There the dice were always loaded against the hide-bound older generation; and she would have despised any one who refused to tread the heights hand in hand with a superman. The conflict was more evenly matched when the hide-bound older generation was composed of her own people. Before setting out to tread the heights she would probably be compelled to break with her family. The heights might prove less alluring on closer acquaintance. And she had yet to be convinced that Ambrose Sheridan was a superman. To Colin he was, briefly, "a cad"; Sir John Ferrers called him "very able and very dangerous"; Geoffrey Mallock, no fool, had come away from his first encounter that day, condemning him as "a wind-bag". Was she blinded by what her father called excessive hero-worship?

Or were these others blinded by antagonism to anything strange? Always Sheridan came surrounded by an atmosphere of his own: the atmosphere of the actor who forgets he has left the stage and of the preacher who thinks he is still in his pulpit. Doubtless Napoleon carried with him the same air of demoniac energy, of passionate conviction and ruthless will. Doubtless, with him too, the air was carefully cultivated: did not Napoleon admit that his passions, apparently uncontrollable, might rise to his breast but never to his head? Doubtless the Colins of Napoleon's day, reared in the Regiment of Flanders and surviving to a more vulgar epoch, muttered pettishly that they did not mind his being a superman but that he should really get down from his stump and learn to behave himself when he was in other people's houses.

"You've never told me how you get on with Mr. Sheridan," Auriol murmured when Max had made an end of castle-building.

He took time to consider before answering:

"He's an odd mixture; and I'm no hand at analysin'. You've heard him talkin' about 'the people I represent, the people from whom I spring' . . ."

"I honour him for not being ashamed of what some idiots call 'humble beginnings'," said Auriol quietly, though she could have wished that a phrase which had impressed her at luncheon had not been used before to other audiences.

"I should honour him more if he hadn't been ashamed of the humble name he started life with. It happened to be Albert Sherdle; and he changed it because the other sounded better. I expect his friends were calling him Bert. If you're his friend, you're made. If you're his enemy, he won't rest till he's torn the flesh from your bones. I can't put it clearer than that. And it's pure luck which you happen to be."

"But if you're neither the one nor the other?"

"Give him a wide berth. He's in a hurry; and he don't wait for people to get out of the way. I *like* him. He amuses me with all his stunts and gadgets. Underneath it all I feel he's just a great baby. He sulks like a baby. And he won't play if you don't let him win. Literally, Auriol! When I play squash with him, some precious muscle begins to let up on him as soon as he's losin'. And, by gad, he storms and chucks things about like a baby when he's angry. One of these days he'll come to grief over that. He's badly balanced. If you oppose him . . ."

"He's been pretty stiffly opposed all his life," Auriol interposed defensively.

"By the people who are against him: that's fair enough. But, if you're on his side and you dare to disagree, he's quite equal to throwin' everything up, cuttin' the country . . ."

Auriol remembered the house in Ottawa, which was awaiting Sheridan's retirement. She remembered, too, her own protest against his making her responsible for the shipwreck of his career. If Max was to be believed, it was waste of breath to protest.

V

At the end of dinner Auriol went to her room for an interval of peace before the men came up.

"Five minutes, only five minutes," she caught herself whispering, "to think things out."

In dismal, nerveless reaction from her fury of the afternoon, she saw Joyce fidgeting with the brushes on the dressing-table and tidying her storm-tossed curls; she saw her mother, white-haired and plump, placidly waiting for all these sharp tongues to blunt themselves with their own violence; and she saw herself, slowly undressing, fiercely biting her lips when she was unobserved, cunningly stringing phrases that were cruel enough to hurt and not so cruel as to betray that she had lost command of herself. A hideous picture! The more hideous for the immediate contrast, when they all offered her a tacit apology, when Colin—awkwardly compromising between the affectionate brother and the stern deputy-patriarch, murmured that it was rotten luck this should all have happened on her birthday. If one of her presents had been the usual three wishes—or two, one!—she would have wished everything unsaid or forgotten. If she could assemble people by clapping her hands, she would tell her mother that she was coming to Italy after all; she would assure Colin that she was not going to let them all down; she would beg her father not to look so worried. If these wretched people would only go, she could say it all now!

The rumble of deep voices floated up the stairs and through her open door. She raced down, to reach the drawing-room before the men came up, and squeezed in as her father, from an invisible depth, called up:

"Take your cigars with you! We smoke all over the house."

A moment later, the Duke of Killarney came in, fat, amiable and dense, with Sir John Ferrers: a waddling gander with a twittering sparrow, Auriol decided. They were talking in undertones; and she divined that they were discussing the Sheridan mission.

"Side-tracking him, eh?" the duke was asking.

"He's the obvious man for the job," the foreign secretary answered without committing himself.

Geoffrey Mallock entered next, a little flushed and more than a little voluble, his eye-glasses askew and his pallid face in some way sinister; then came Max; then Lord Otway. An indistinguishable cluster lingered in the doorway. While the older men looked for chairs and audiences, Colin kicked the rugs aside and left the room, muttering "gramophone."

Auriol, cross-legged on a cushion by her father's chair, looked on with a frown of mild perplexity. Bobbie Selhurst and Max, Geoffrey and the duke had all asked her to dance, but she wanted an opportunity of apologizing for the temper and turmoil of the day. Now that the opportunity was made, she neglected it and returned to the question that had been puzzling her throughout the later stages of dinner: how, fundamentally, did Mr. Sheridan differ from these others? He would be out of place in the strictly conventional dining-room, but he would be more out of place up here. The tumbled rugs, the gramophone, the spectacle of Lady Otway with Mallock would have removed him to an eminence or at least to a distance. He could never unbend ; or, if he unbent, it was in a way different from theirs. He would think all this undignified, never dreaming that dignity was relative and that every class had its own, capricious standard.

A word like " class " made Auriol shiver ; but it was the only explanation of an indefinable difference that made the success or the failure of a party. Confronted with another "class", every one in the room would have been " class-conscious " ; and, if Mr. Sheridan had been there, he would have been " conscious " of every one, ultimately antagonistic to every one. Nobody would have felt quite at ease, which was another way of saying that Mr. Sheridan had not been brought up in quite the same tradition as the others. Only a fool, setting the duke and Mr. Sheridan side by side, would maintain that the one tradition was better than the other, but it was interesting to discover that the difference existed. This party would never feel quite at ease with Mr. Sheridan ; and he would never feel quite at ease with this party. The impression might be analysed and explained, but it could not be dismissed.

"And it's not only politics," Auriol decided, as the couples swung by. " My lord Selhurst and Winifred and Lady Orpington have to dislike him for the honour of the family. And Sir John has a personal feud. And the duke is always pulled by his die-hards in the *Morning Telegraph.* But the others ? Guy and Philip, my own brothers-in-law, who've only met him here when he's laid himself out to be charming ? Is it that they have no imagination ? "

She wondered what Mr. Sheridan was doing at that moment. Working, of course; and, while he worked, forgetting that such a person as Auriol Otway existed. Did he realize the solid square of antagonism which he had called into being? It was frightening! It was also stimulating. Any one with a spark of chivalry must admire his courage. Single-handed, as always, in whatever he attempted . . .

The first dance ended; and Max began to hunt through a pile of records. Colin crossed the room to enquire why Auriol was being so idle.

"I like looking on, once in a way," she answered.

"Have the next one with me," he suggested.

Auriol began to shake her head and then suddenly jumped to her feet. Colin was sorry; he wanted her to enjoy herself; he was wasting on her a dance that he would rather a hundred times have had with Winifred Selhurst.

"I'd love to! Thank you," she answered.

Max was still muttering the names of outmoded records when the butler appeared at the door.

"Miss Auriol, sir," he told Colin. "Wanted on the 'phone."

"Can't you take a message?" asked Colin. "Who is it?"

"Mr. Sheridan, sir."

"Oh!" Colin turned to find that Auriol was at his elbow. "He'd better say you're engaged, hadn't he? I mean to say . . ."

"Put him through to my room, will you?" said Auriol.

The butler bowed and withdrew with a murmured "very good, miss." Auriol was preparing to follow when she felt her brother's hand closing over her wrist.

"I think you'd better let me deal with this," he whispered.

"What d'you mean? It's me he asked for."

"No need for a scene! I say again, I think you'd better let me deal with this."

"And I say you'd better mind your own business, Colin! Let me go!"

"Not so quickly! We can't fight this out here . . ."

"I don't want to fight anything out anywhere. You can let me go or not as you please, but there's no need to hurt me, which is what you're doing now. Thank you! Go down and 'deal with' the thing, if you like, but be careful what you do. You can make my apologies and say we have people dining. Or you can let me speak for myself. It makes no difference, because I shall telephone on my own account as soon as these people have gone."

"We'll see about that."

He strode to the door; and Auriol walked slowly back to her father's chair.

"Telephone," she explained briefly. Then, though she had meant to curb her tongue, she could not help adding: "It's Mr. Sheridan. He wants to speak to me, but Colin felt obliged to take the message. I hope he's not being rude. I'm not sure I shan't go to Italy after all. I can't stand much more of Colin in his present mood. What's the matter with him, daddy?"

"I think he was rather surprised . . . in fact, we all were . . ." began Lord Otway.

Auriol did not listen to his answer. Ill-directed violence missed its mark; and she was almost sorry for her parents in that they were suffering for the folly of Joyce and Colin. If they had left her alone, there would have been no trouble; but now, though she was utterly indifferent to Ambrose, she would cheerfully have run away with him.

She wondered what Colin was saying. He was dreadfully limited, poor boy! Probably he was explaining the first principles of ethics, as they were understood by the Otways, reminding Mr. Sheridan that a man promised at marriage to cherish his wife in sickness and health, weal and woe, even when he was tired of her. By Otway ethics, no man ever defaulted on a bargain; no man ever complained that a bargain was hard.

"I said you were engaged," he announced smoothly, on his return.

"Did you say I'd ring him up later?" asked Auriol.

"No."

"Oh . . . well, it doesn't matter. I will. I'm sorry this business has been a surprise to you all; it was a surprise to me too. For the future, whatever I do, you'll none of you have the slightest excuse for being surprised! I don't think I'll dance this, Colin, after all."

PART II

CHAPTER I

Saviours of Society

'This I see clearest probably of men
With power to act and influence, now alive:
Juster than they to the true state of things;
In consequence, more tolerant that, side
By side, shall co-exist and thrive alike
In the age, the various sorts of happiness
Moral, mark!—not material—moods o' the mind
Suited to man and man his opposite:
Say, minor modes of movement—hence to there,
Or thence to here, or simply round about—
So long as each toe spares its neighbour's kibe,
Nor spoils the major march and main advance."
ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society.*

I

GEOFFREY MALLOCK'S "*portrait of Mr. Sheridan*" for the gallery of contemporary statesmen in the *Weekly Review* had all the success that he had expected in torturing the vanity of his victim. Drifting into the secretaries' room two days before the *Koh-i-nor* was scheduled to sail, Mallock found Max Hendry knitting his brows over a piled tray of cuttings and was asked if he could identify the anonymous author of his own article.

"A fellow who knows how to write," Mallock answered approvingly. "What are these?"

He pulled over a pile of caricatures and studied the trade commission in the mirror of the popular press.

After nearly a fortnight of discussion, the public seemed to have realized that there was more in the appointment than the official announcement had suggested. "Can't *you go*? Must *you stay?*" was the legend under the principal cartoon in *Puck;* and the cowering leaders of the Standish government, with the colonial secretary at their head, were represented as pushing Mr. Sheridan up the gangway of his ship and assuring him that he need be in no hurry to return. The Sheridan press concentrated its attention on a different aspect of the struggle and symbolized it more flatteringly: in one paper Mr. Sheridan was drawn as Cincinnatus, summoned from his plough to save Rome; in another, intended for less erudite readers, he was shewn—in the cartoon of his own choice—in conversation with the reassuring shade of Buonaparte, being reminded that "*They tried to get rid of me too.*"

"The chief's told me to find out who wrote this," Max explained as he retrieved the offending article.

"Doesn't he like it?" asked Mallock.

"He never likes bein' laughed at, but he appreciates good ink-slingin'. He'd like to get this fellow for one of his own papers. Poor old Blue Peter is next on the list. The chief is only waiting till the mission starts, so that he won't seem to have a hand in it. And then he'll go for him as he went for the labour people. If Blue Peter thinks he's going to have six months' holiday, he's makin' the mistake of his life."

"He'll take some shifting," predicted Mallock, who had worked long enough for Lord Orpington to appreciate his tenacity. "The mob loves him."

"I know, but Lady Orpington told me these attacks were getting on his nerves. A pity . . ."

Max turned to another cartoon in which the colonial secretary, menaced by a yapping cur with "*Sheridan Press*" on its collar, was assured by John Bull that the brute was not worth a thrashing. For more years than either young man could remember, the public had capriciously decided to make an idol of "Blue Peter". The Orpington racing colours—cornflower blue with white sleeves and a tasselled blue cap—were known on every course; the crowd parted to make way for his blue Rolls-Royce; and he himself was cheered in the streets as he rode in a blue cut-away coat and square bowler to the Colonial Office. Even the genteel typists with shingled hair, whom he addressed in the oaths of the Regency, were only restrained from cheering by their native gentility. To the populace, he was almost the last and quite the most picturesque representative of a vanishing order, who recalled the great days when a prime minister could lead in a Derby winner; if more of his kidney devoted themselves to public life, so much the better—it was felt—for public life. Who ever heard of labour troubles in the eighteenth century? And it was to the third and fourth Georges that Lord Orpington belonged: "the right man in the right place, even if it was the wrong century," as Mallock once remarked of his public position.

Though "reconciliation" was the order of the day, only a political backwoodsman could doubt that a war without quarter would be waged between Lord Orpington and Mr. Sheridan during the next twelve months. Only a political gambler would have ventured, however, to say which would drag himself away from the battle-field alive. Orpington, as Sheridan had the best means of knowing, would be difficult to unseat so long as the populace worshipped his personality and ignored his qualities as an administrator. He would be hard to unseat so long as he remained in public life from a sense of public duty, fancying simple-mindedly that he had ended a political crisis by winning the Oaks and believing without arrogance that the dominions were comforted to have at the Colonial Office a member of the Jockey Club who ran his own pack of hounds and possessed the finest herd of shorthorns in England. Sheridan, as nobody knew better than Orpington, struck to kill.

"I'll tell the chief *I* can't find out who wrote the beastly thing," said Max, making for the door of the work-room.

"His own people in Fleet Street . . ." suggested Mallock, secure in his anonymity.

"He's been to them already. Final council of war this morning. 'Gentlemen'," he mimicked, "'I have summoned you here to say that, if I have any recommendations to make, people must be ready to hear them. And the government must be ready to act on them. Not that I've much hope of the government so long as Orpington is at the Colonial Office.' In other words," Max translated, "a good show for the old man and none at all for Orpington."

II

It was a day of final councils, to be ended by Lord Orpington's dinner to the mission. Editors, managers, trustees and secretaries had all been given their orders. The Colonial Office had arranged a suitable reception at each port-of-call; and Sheridan, to judge from his conversation, was already preparing for his return. Nothing was being left to chance. If any one blundered, it would not be for want of priming; but, in Sheridan's organization of his life, no one was allowed to blunder.

"Nothing more you want *me* to do?" asked Andrew Livingstone at the last council of all. "You're feeling fairly optimistic?"

"Should I have undertaken this job if I couldn't carry it through?" Sheridan asked with the unconcealed arrogance which he reserved for the ears of his one confidant. "'The insoluble problem of unemployment'! How sick I am of that phrase! I could cure unemployment to-day, as it was cured in America, by a managed currency. I could cure it from this chair."

"That device of Keynes?" asked Livingstone. "Why don't you?"

Sheridan looked long at his friend before answering. Not even to Livingstone did he confide all his thoughts; and, as an artist in public effects, he shrank from disclosing his methods. His success would be more indivisibly his at the end of six months spent with the eyes of the world upon him; his policy would not then be described as some one else's "device"; and it would be more striking when a challenge had been thrown down and picked up than if he passively propounded his remedy now. Moreover, though he could solve the riddle in his own work-room, he would prefer to solve it from the Colonial Office.

"If Standish won't follow America's example," he answered, "I see no reason why he should follow my advice. He'll listen to talk about imperial trade and guaranteed credits when his hair would stand on end at a managed currency. Well, if he wants the Union Jack, he shall have it; and I shall strengthen my position at home and abroad. Poor old Standish! And yet I can't blame him. He'd quote the Treasury and most of the banks and all the old-fashioned economists; but, if he wants to see unemployment disappearing like water from an emptying cistern, he can see it to-morrow. You saw it, if you were watching, in America after the slump. People here are so obsessed by the idea of money: if they'd think of purchasing-power instead. . . . Let the Bank of England loosen its purse-strings. Lend, lend, lend! New purchasing-power means new purchases; new purchases mean new orders to manufacturers; new orders to manufacturers mean new orders to growers and shippers, an increase of employment all round, a wider distribution of wages which in turn means more purchasing-power, a second set of new purchases, a second set of new orders to manufacturers as the newly employed workman orders new boots and clothes and cottages! It's an endless chain of cause and effect, with purchasing-power as the *primum mobile.* As that's restricted, employment is restricted; as it's increased, employment is increased."

Carried away by his own enthusiasm, Sheridan was revealing more clearly than he had intended that his prestidigitation and his patter about imperial markets were designed only to draw the attention of his audience away from a trick nearer to hand. He examined Livingstone's face to see how far he had betrayed himself.

Livingstone, he found, was smiling:

"So, whatever comes of the mission, you've always this purchasing-power business to fall back on?"

Sheridan nodded:

"I shouldn't have accepted the mission, otherwise, though I don't believe we shall need to touch the currency. Trade began to improve on the day I accepted Standish's invitation. It will go on improving. Nothing succeeds like success, but some one must start the success. Fortunately, the public believed in me. If it hadn't . . ." He shrugged his shoulders. "I can't risk a public failure."

"You're ready enough to take other risks," Livingstone hinted.

"We won't go into that again!" Sheridan snapped.

Livingstone stretched himself in his chair and laughed with an unconcern that shewed he was not to be browbeaten when a client had to hear unpalatable truths. With his long legs and short body he looked like a monstrous tadpole; and the tadpole idea was strengthened by a bulging forehead and a runaway chin. His moustache was sandy and irregular; his hair a sandy net spread over a gleaming dome. Conscious of his insignificance, he derived a queer pride from it, as a small stinging-fly might derive pride from the consciousness of its poisonous strength.

"Any new developments ? " he asked.

" Not that I know of. I think her parents have been persecuting her a certain amount."

" Then they're playing your game for you."

" They would be if I were in a position to marry her at once. As it is, they're simply unbalancing her. I don't want an hysterical ' yes ' to-day, followed by an equally hysterical ' no ' in six months' time. It must be her cool, considered judgement. We shan't hold any communication while I'm away. I've given Otway an undertaking to that effect."

" He's playing your game for you again. A six months' correspondence would probably end things. Is your wife becoming any more reconciled to the idea ? "

Sheridan's powerful face crumpled into sudden petulance, like a spoilt child's :

" I can't discuss it with her. I don't care much about discussing it with any one. For six months we're going to let things remain exactly as they are. If Auriol and I are both of the same mind then, we shall go through with it."

" You've got that far, have you ? And you say there are no new developments ! "

" She promised me yesterday."

Livingstone whistled softly to himself and walked to the window and back without answering. On coming opposite his friend, he threw up his head and laughed at some thought which he would not divulge.

" Then I must give you my opinion without waiting six months. It won't pay, Ambrose." His eye was caught by the open copy of the *Weekly Review ;* and he glanced at the marked page while he waited for an answer. ' *This too will be preserved for the historian, but what will he make of it ?* ' he read. " It won't pay. We're at a transitional stage : in another ten years you could do what you liked ; you could do what you liked now, if you were anybody else. As it is, you'll make the third to Parnell and Dilke. Society will cast you forth. The historian will probably think rather poorly of society; he'll write an essay on *The Divorce-complex in English Politics*. . . . That's how it strikes a contemporary. You're going to disregard my advice . . ."

"If I do, it'll be the first time," Sheridan interrupted with sudden indecision.

"But you will. Hitherto I've only talked to your head; and that was always easy to reach. I can't argue with your heart. I don't want to. This may be a case of the world well lost for love. I only want you to understand that you *will* lose the world. You can't have both. . . . Now I won't preach at you any longer."

As Livingstone went out by one door, Max came in by the other to warn Sheridan that it was time for him to dress. He had to repeat the warning; and, even when Sheridan was half-way upstairs, he but dimly apprehended that he was to be the guest of honour at Lord Orpington's farewell banquet. Something, Max decided, was ruffling the massive calm of his chief's mind. Was he worried about his speech? Was he daunted by Geoffrey Mallock's talk about the unsuccessful "saviours of society" who were being assembled to honour in advance the successful? Had Livingstone been abusing his privilege of plain speaking?

"Damn the fellow, why doesn't he get a move on?" Max whispered to himself, as Sheridan came to a standstill by a window on the stairs and gazed across the park to the distant towers of Westminster. "Sorry, sir! I didn't catch what you said!" he called out, as an indistinct mutter floated down to him.

Sheridan turned with a start and seemed suddenly to awaken.

"I was thinking aloud," he explained. "Nothing! I shall only be a few minutes. . . . *You can't have both,*" he repeated in a whisper when he was by himself in his dressing-room.

Livingstone was very sure! Livingstone was also very sound. He was *too* sound, *too* sure! "*You're going to disregard my advice . . .*" Livingstone knew him better than he knew himself, but did he know public opinion better than the man whose flair had brought him to the threshold of the cabinet?

As he bathed and dressed, Sheridan ran over the interviews of the last five hours. He was going to succeed where every one else had failed; and on his return in six months' time he would be invited to cross the cabinet threshold. In six months' time he would have Auriol's answer and would know whether she had prevailed over her family. It was not unduly optimistic to hope that in six months poor Laura would have seen what every one else had been seeing for six years. He would have beaten her friends and Auriol's family, he would have triumphed over the failures who were now struggling to keep him out of office. He would have the place he desired and the woman he needed.

Yet, if Livingstone was to be believed, he could not have both. If Livingstone was to be believed, this night marked the moment of his greatest decision. Sheridan paused in his dressing and walked to the window. One or the other? What a ridiculous question! He would have both! If indeed he had been obliged to choose, the choice would have been hopeless: there was no satisfaction in his victories until Auriol shared them; and, without her inspiration, he could not even be sure of winning. The converse—what had Livingstone called it? "*Love; and the world well lost*"—he had never contemplated.

And it was by refusing to contemplate failure that Sheridan had so far not failed. By refusing to contemplate illness he was hardly ever ill. Suffering had never, since he grew up, thrown its shadow across his life; he refused to contemplate that it ever should.

"No cleverness of *mine*," he muttered, returning to his interrupted dressing.

Prudence might safeguard health; and perseverance might ensure against some failures. It was providence alone, however, or luck, a man's star, whatever any one liked to call it, that determined why, of two men, one should prosper while the other was born unto trouble as the sparks flew upward. His enemies called him mockingly "the man of destiny", not seeing that every one was a man of destiny.

As he walked downstairs, Sheridan saw his wife's patient head in the hall. She, now, seemed predestined to unhappiness; and young Hendry, if he was seriously attached to Auriol, was predestined to a taste of disappointment.

III

IN spite of his secretary's warnings, Sheridan was ten minutes late in reaching the Orpingtons' house.

"Polishing his speech?" Mallock enquired of Max. "I feel I could make it for him. And Blue Peter's. However . . .

> '*Since forced to muse the appointed time*
> *On these precious facts and truths sublime,—*
> *Let us fitly employ it, under our breath,*
> *In saying Ben Ezra's Song of Death.*'

I told you all these people were dead? They don't know it, but they are: all the saviours of society."

Max looked round the crowded drawing-room and edged his way towards an easel where a plan of the table was displayed.

"I should have said most of them had no known form," he grunted. "Where did you find 'em, Geoffrey?"

"I've been collecting them ever since the war. You remember it: the war to end war? Society was tottering at the armistice and is not quite steady on its legs yet. But with the help of these gentlemen . . . General Sir Sutton May! He'll save society by giving us all six weeks' training a year and proclaiming martial law as a cure for strikes. Viner! The brains of socialism, who drops his aitches from sheer contempt for the *bourgeoisie*: he'd save us by nationalizing industry. I wanted Winston to meet him: Winston would save us here and now if we'd accept him as our English Mussolini. The Bishop of Exminster! He'd save society the world over by reconciling the Christian churches. Lord Walstow! He could save society to-morrow and in a hundred different ways if only more people would buy his papers and vote as he tells them and let Fleet Street run the government. You see I've tried to make salvation as variegated as possible. Fleming! He'd save society by increasing the bureaucracy. Admiral Trench: see under General Sir Sutton May, the marine species of the same genus. A covey of politicians! Hyde Masterman, Tracy-Tracy, Kenneth Doyle. Nothing to say about *them*, except that they're all as dead as the parties they pretend to lead. Hullo! Here's the man who's going to march us into the promised land!"

Though he was accompanied by his wife, Sheridan contrived to enter alone; and the mutter of voices, which had fallen as she came in, died into silence when his own name was called. Of the fifty men in the room, he was almost alone in being without decorations; and the conventional cut and colour of his clothes appeared in agreeable low-relief against his host's high-shouldered blue coat and strapped trousers.

"If I am late, you must forgive me. My time is not quite my own at present."

The apology delivered, Sheridan employed the interval before dinner was announced in exchanging salutations with his neighbours and displaying what the Sheridan papers had been taught to call their master's "royal memory". Mallock watched with malicious interest. He had been right in saying that curiosity would be the first emotion and hostility the second; but, though he shared both with the others of the company who craned their heads for a glimpse of the newcomer and then turned to their neighbours with smiles and whispers, he could not deny that Sheridan dominated the room.

"Come to see the last of him?" he whispered to Joyce Cavaly.

The Otways had been prevented from accepting Lord Orpington's invitation; so had the Wainwrights; so had Colin and Auriol. Reading one refusal after another and recalling a hint that the family, with a single exception, would not be sorry when Sheridan was at the other side of the world, Mallock surmised that the young Cavalys had been sent to convince the guest of honour that he was not being boycotted.

"It's a fine head," Joyce answered, as he led her to her place.

"Los Angeles?" Mallock hazarded. "I feel I've seen him officiating in a shoe-shine parlour through so many first reels! Washington, D.C., with a flash-back to the White House as he sees it in his dreams. The White House again in the sixth reel, with our friend as president. If he's really a super-man, he oughtn't to look like one. It's misleading; and it upsets my pet theory that square jaws and mouths which close like traps and steel-blue eyes which turn the man of action into the visionary by obligingly changing colour are never found outside a film-studio. I may be wrong. I shall be able to tell you more in six months' time."

"Will you only be away six months?"

Mallock bowed ironically:

"I thank you for the happy phrasing."

"I only meant that six months was a short time for all you had to get through." From the worried, furtive glances that she threw in Sheridan's direction when she fancied herself to be unobserved, Mallock felt sure she was wishing that the mission would last for six years and that its head would die before the end. "What's your candid opinion of him, Geoffrey?"

Before answering, Mallock glanced about him to make sure that he would not be overheard:

"I don't believe any one can do what he's done in the time without being a rogue, but, then, most of the people we know are rogues without the excuse of success. You should ask Auriol about him, though: I met him for the first time last week."

"I don't think much of Auriol's judgement about anything," Mrs. Cavaly answered pettishly.

Mallock smiled in secret triumph at having substantiated Lord Orpington's vague hint. The Otways were thoroughly disgruntled. "Talk about a bull in a china-shop . . ." he whispered to himself and was delighted by the justice of the figure: in physique and in morals, Ambrose Sheridan was a magnificent animal, but he was an animal. And the Otways, wherever they went, carried with them the atmosphere of an old-fashioned china-shop. They were exquisitely moulded and fired; they were hard and brittle; some of them, in a sense, had been chipped and mended; all were ranged on high shelves out of harm's way.

The Otways had rid themselves of the intruder for six months; but he now knew his way to the door and they were obviously afraid that he would burst it open. Perhaps—who could say?—it would be opened for him by Auriol, who had become strangely independent at Cambridge.

It was but a bigger and more varied china-shop, very slightly better used to the visits of bulls, that Sheridan had invaded when he blundered into the public life of England. The fragile figures had looked down from their high shelves in the middle of the nineteenth century to see the Jew Disraeli, with his oriental hide and bellow, subjugating the shop so artfully that nearly fifty years after his death he had become a sacred animal. There followed Chamberlain ; later there followed Lloyd-George ; and now Sheridan was stamping at the door. For the rocking and tinkling pieces on the shelves it was a life of sustained panic, only made tolerable by the knowledge that conditions over the way were far worse. There a china-shop had been set down in the middle of a byre.

" Curiosity," Mallock reflected, looking from face to face as one pair of eyes after another turned to scrutinize the principal guest, " and then hostility."

IV

By now, halfway through dinner, the curiosity had passed ; but the hostility remained, nowhere burning more hotly than under the cool and tranquil exterior of Lord Orpington's own family. To Bobbie Selhurst it was a mark of degeneracy that his father could not call on Sheridan with a crop ; to Lady Margaret and her sisters it was an outrage that they should be required to shake hands with their father's self-appointed assassin ; to Lady Orpington this was the price that people of a different tradition had to pay for mixing themselves up with politics nowadays.

" It's curious that the conservative party can't support itself in leaders," Mallock observed.

"Almost as curious as that the liberal leaders can't keep themselves in parties," said Joyce with a pitying glance in the direction of Sir Hyde Masterman.

" Conservative leaders are one of the chief liberal exports ; and the raw material of them is one of the chief exports of conservatism. Men like Winston are shipped over raw, worked up into leaders and shipped back. I'm afraid you must swallow Sheridan, Joyce ; and, unless you can find some one or some combination to resist him, I predict that he will swallow you."

" I'd swallow him," answered Joyce, " if I felt I could trust him. Can *you ?* "

" I've never tried. It's a mistake to trust people . . . Hullo, Blue Peter's up."

The speech that followed was a disappointment to those who had never heard Lord Orpington before and a double disappointment to those who had. On appropriate occasions such as a Derby-night dinner, when the audience knew what to expect and Lord Orpington gave them what they expected, he could speak with bluff fluency, interspersing familiar jokes and exploiting a vivid presence and personality. Some one, as a rule, could be trusted to pipe up quaveringly at the end: " *For he's a jolly good fellow* " ; some one else, in proposing a vote of thanks, would make affectionate reference to " Blue Peter " ; everybody always looked happily flushed ; and Lord Orpington, fingering the lapels of the famous blue coat, smoothing the blue ribbon of his garter or bending to sniff the blue cornflowers in his button-hole, would beam on the company in assured knowledge that he was an institution, that his Regency clothes and oaths would not be suffered in another man and that, when he died, the writers of his obituary would say " *We shall not see his like again.*"

Now, as he rose, the audience noted with dismay that he was armed with a sheaf of notes. This dinner, he explained, was an opportunity for him to wish god-speed to a man who had undertaken at great personal inconvenience a task for which he was pre-eminently fitted by his experience, by his prestige in five continents and by the fact that the task properly lay and should always lie outside the arena of party politics.

"My *God!*" Mallock groaned.

"We have ventured," Lord Orpington proclaimed, "to institute an enquiry. We have asked a man who is not frightened by obsolete cries to see whether, in the opinion of himself and his colleagues, there *is* conceivably a common trade-interest between two or more parts of the empire, whether a glut of labour at home and a shortage in Australia are different aspects of the same problem; whether restricted immigration abroad and limited output at home are symptoms of the same defect in vision. The nightmare of this government, as of its predecessors, has been—and still is—unemployment. If we cannot remedy that, we shall fall as they fell, but at least we shall force the most grudging of our critics to admit that we have done all in our power to find a remedy."

During the applause that followed, Lord Orpington looked again at his notes. With bankruptcy and disorder in central and eastern Europe, he gabbled, new markets had to be found for British exports if the people of Great Britain were even to be fed. It was the paramount business of the Colonial Office to explore the possibilities of increased trade with the dominions and colonies.

"I say this," he added, "to explain why the mission is sailing under the flag of the Colonial Office and why it has been my privilege to-night to welcome the members of the mission here."

It was only as Lord Orpington laid down the last page of his notes that Mallock realized the speech was over. He had expected more copious adulation to assuage Sheridan's natural soreness at being excluded from the cabinet; he had hoped for an incautious phrase, which might have drawn a devastating retort.

In the uneasy interval before Lord Orpington called on his chief guest to reply, Mallock glanced to the end of the room where Sheridan was leaning back and talking to Lady Orpington. He seemed unembarrassed by the prospect of having to make a speech and unmoved by the consciousness that he was being watched and appraised. At three places' remove Mrs. Sheridan seemed to be struggling with the emotions that he might more properly have felt: it was her eyes that had flashed in gratitude for Lord Orpington's tepid compliments; and it was now her fingers that played nervously with the stem of her wine-glass as she waited for his name to be called.

Then, as he stood up, a rattle of perfunctory applause mounted into genuine enthusiasm. Whatever any one might think of his politics or his personality, nobody could deny Sheridan a magnificent presence. It seemed as if there would be no end to him as he slowly straightened himself; and, once more, his simplicity of dress and bearing contrasted pleasingly with Lord Orpington's calculated effects.

Those who had never heard him before listened eagerly for his first words. The voice was in keeping with the appearance: unaffected and clear, with a rapid, low utterance; well-educated, to Mallock's critical ear, rather than well-bred, but facile and free from any local accent. His choice of language was more ambitious than his delivery and proportionately less successful; the striking phrase held a deadly fascination for him, but the phrases that struck him were for the most part those which had lost their edge.

"The leading-article," Mallock yawned. "Clear, dignified, weighty; but, alas, alas! I see no reason why it should ever stop!"

Contrary to expectation and despite a fondness for autobiography which he betrayed in every paragraph of his incessant writing, Sheridan contented himself with no more than a few sentences to explain and justify his presence.

"This is not a party occasion; and I am glad of it. I fear, my lord, that I lack the makings of your 'good party-man'. I have worked so long with my own hands, I have employed so many other hands, I have fought so hard for a liberal spirit, I have found so much to conserve and so much else to reform radically that the collar of a party-label strangles me. The condemnation of your party-system is to be found in this: whenever your party-man is torn from his sham-fights and flung naked against reality, he prays that the terrifying issue may be lifted above party-politics. The monarchy, our foreign policy, imperial defence: he would be shouted down—and rightly—who tried to make party-questions of these things. The late war obliterated party-divisions; and I assert soberly that our efforts to obliterate the war must be as great and as desperate as our efforts to win the war. I hope that, when I have completed the enquiry with which I have been entrusted, my report will be judged on its merits by men and women who are as deeply determined to wrest order from our industrial chaos as they were to snatch victory from war. I might well despair at the outset if I thought that any one would say: '*This is something that we've been taught to condemn unheard.*' Rather I would have you say: '*If this will set our industry and commerce on a sound footing, we will support it; and, if the devil himself proposed it, we would vote for him.*' To some of you I may seem to flatter myself by this comparison with the devil. . . ."

Suspecting, from his smile, that this sally was humorously intended, a few members of the audience laughed encouragingly. The laughter died away rather miserably as one after another realized that Sheridan was alive to their general enmity and wished to shew them he was alive to it.

Mallock glanced round him with a cautious new admiration for his chief's courage in challenging and defying a hostility that simmered, however politely hidden, in every part of the room. Labour would never forgive him for sapping the first labour-government in English political history; and, though the "hands" that he boasted of employing might remember that he was one of them and had risked private fortune and public position in championing them, the leaders of organized labour regarded him sourly as a man who told them bluntly that British labour was losing ground in the international race and that the restriction of output was permanently impoverishing the working-classes. And, though he treated all his opponents with the same irritating superiority, the labour leaders were less used to Sheridan than the men of other parties.

" Yes. I should support the devil himself, when he convinced me that he could cure unemployment, as Lincoln enquired the name of Grant's whiskey-merchant in the hope that his other generals would win Grant's victories by drinking to excess of Grant's whiskey. I should not examine his political orthodoxy through party spectacles. And this for the adequate reason that party-divisions have become meaningless shibboleths. In my youth we were fighting about education and licensing, the vote of the House of Lords, home rule and Welsh disestablishment : controversies that are now more dead than medieval bickerings about the beatific vision or the double procession. Who remembers them ? Who cares ? Their dead shoes have been filled by fuller-blooded apparitions : nationalization of industry, a general tariff, a capital levy have been paraded in their place. The professional politician has waxed so warm over their importance that he fails to see they are only apparitions. The party-man clings so tenaciously to the party-idea that he does not realize how parties are now merged. Nevertheless the coming of the first labour-government is not yet so remote in time that you have forgotten its arrival. In 1923 the reigning conservative ministry fought the election on a tariff ; labour fought on a capital-levy ; liberalism fought on general opposition to a tariff and to a capital-levy and to anything that anybody cared to suggest. Parties were so evenly divided that conservatism threw its tariff overboard ; labour followed with its capital-levy; and, as the older issues were buried, there was not one thing except party-spirit to keep parties alive. I challenge you to contradict me! The party-man has cut his own throat and ended the justification of his own existence. Until new issues are born, the bluest tory can vote labour without fearing a capital-levy, the reddest labour-man can vote tory without fearing a tariff, and both can vote liberal. Party divisions are dead; it is only hypocrisy that keeps parties alive. And, as I have found it impossible to work comfortably with my neck surrounded by a label that means nothing, I am naturally suspect to 'good party-men'. I only hope that this prejudice will not militate against a report presented by men of all parties and by the official advisers who are constitutionally barred from being party-men. This toast has been coupled with my name; but, as I am replying for my mission as a whole, I should like to say a word about those others who comprise it." . . .

V

ONLY waiting until "the secretary to the commission" had been mentioned in adequately flattering terms, Mallock allowed his attention to wander.

He had expected to hear Sheridan either defending the zig-zag course which he had followed from one party to another or else defying the hostility of all the parties and standing before them as a non-party man. Sheridan had done more than this: by demonstrating, in a form that no one could lightly brush aside, that old party-divisions were obliterated, he seemed to be making a bid for the support of all. "The moderate men of all parties, united in a national party," Mallock reflected scornfully. It was the catch-penny phrase of people who were equally ignorant of English history and English politics; it was the dream of discredited politicians who, failing to capture the party-organization, tried to replace it with an organization of their own. National parties, centre parties, coalitions: they marked the artful dodger in politics who bought off party opposition by sharing party spoil. The dream dated from Bolingbroke; and it had never been realized for more than a few months at a time. Was Sheridan following this venerable mirage or was he simply preparing a favourable reception for his report?

"Ought we to be going up?" whispered Joyce Cavaly. "People seem to be arriving for the reception."

Mallock nodded and moved towards the door. Lord Orpington and their principal guest had already gone upstairs.

"Saviours of society!" he chuckled. "This is a comic party, a comic country, a comic world!"

Planting himself by the door of the first drawing-room, he watched his new chief take leave of host and guests. If there had been gaps in the ranks at dinner, the saviours of society had filled them for the reception. Politicians of the old school and the new, conservative, labour and liberal, newspaper-proprietors and party managers, civil servants and trade-union secretaries, publicists and financiers, divines and artists: the life and strength, the enterprise and adroitness, the experience and courage of the country seemed to have been gathered under one roof.

"I wonder," he murmured to Max, "whether history would be changed if the floor collapsed."

And, when the rooms were most thronged with all who had come to see him, Sheridan was fostering the Sheridan myth by returning home to work.

"Well . . . Good-night!" said Lord Orpington. "And I suppose it's good-bye? Good-night, Mrs. Sheridan! Good-night, Geoffrey! I wish you the best of luck and the pleasantest of voyages . . ."

"And the safest of returns?" asked Mallock.

"That goes without saying."

It had gone without saying or thinking, Mallock reflected, as he hurried ahead to order the Sheridans' car.

CHAPTER II

Between the Acts

> "Whereon the people answered with a shout
> 'The trusty one! no tricksters any more!'
> How could they other? He was in his place."
> ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society.*

I

"WELL, thank God *that's* all over!" exclaimed Kenneth Doyle, turning with a final wave of the hand to the line of foreshortened faces on either side of the *Koh-i-nor's* accommodation-ladder.

"Did Blue Peter send you to make sure that they really did get off?" asked Max.

"Well, I was technically saying good-bye on behalf of the Colonial Office, but I've no doubt Orpington will be glad to know that your respected chief didn't change his mind at the last moment. I suppose, at this point, you and Rushforth take six months' holiday, Max?"

"Don't you think it! In Sheridan's own words, I've been given 'new and important duties', which I'm not at liberty to divulge. D'you want a lift back to London? I'm taking Tony, if you can bear his company."

By changing the subject, still more by alluding to it only in the words that Sheridan himself had employed, Max hoped to conceal that he was struggling with the direst disappointment of his life. The "job" so often discussed had been defined ten minutes before in his last interview with his chief; and, for want of a better title, Max would in future be styled "director of intelligence". The position was highly confidential and would demand his best efforts; it was one that could only be given to a man whom Sheridan trusted as he trusted himself. The duties of the director would consist in living with his finger on the public pulse, tracing the curves of opinion and reporting (in code) whatever in the public life of the country could be of value or interest to a man whose very existence depended on early and accurate information. For a moment Max had been deeply impressed. Later, when he found that his salary was to remain unchanged and that the old duty of reading his employer's press-cuttings was only to be supplemented with a weekly letter of general gossip, it occurred to him that Sheridan was using pretentious language about an arrangement which another man might have described as "*making work for my secretary to keep him out of mischief while I'm away.*"

"Dunno what Auriol will think about it," Max reflected. "Dunno what I ought to think about it myself. If I'm not careful, I shall become like Tony."

As a free liver, confronted with an irreclaimable drunkard, might stop short in horror at prevision of his own ultimate degradation, Max drew back in sudden fear from his unsuspecting companion. At no time had Tony Rushforth commanded his respect, but until this moment Max had never imagined that Doyle or any one would couple them as the victims of their own too slack wills or of Sheridan's too ready good-nature. And yet there were disturbing points of similarity! In early youth Tony had formed an expectation of inheriting a fortune from his father; with the expectation he had formed an unconscious resolution never to toil or spin while others could be found to toil or spin for him ("The guv'nor never told *me* I should have to fend for myself," Max grumbled). Tony's inheritance had dwindled to a houseful of furniture and a number of anecdotes beginning:

"*I remember the old duke saying to my mother once 'My dear Lady Rushforth . . .'*" ("The guv'nor's always talkin' of sellin' his horses to pay the interest on his mortgages"). As neither of these assets could be readily negotiated at the bar, Laura Sheridan contrived that her feckless younger brother should be made secretary of a company formed to hold the Sheridan shares in undertakings with which Sheridan himself did not care to be publicly associated ("Auriol wangled this job for me," said Max).

"I rather envy you," Kenneth Doyle yawned; and Max felt that the parallel had been disastrously completed.

Many people must be envious of Tony. The summer saw him at Deauville, the winter at St. Jean-de-Luz: happy at all times and in all places, balancing the known advantages of being a courted bachelor against the chance of scaling greater heights by an imposing marriage. Few of the well-connected infants who had been helped into the world by Sir Arthur escaped being helped through the social world by his son. For an anguished moment Tony's comfort had, indeed, been threatened by a war in which he envisaged himself, for a season of brief delirium, as a soldier, sweating, suffering and perhaps being killed; even before he could invoke his potent brother-in-law's aid, however, the nightmare was ended by the army doctors. Once safely rejected, Tony chafed decorously under his inability to serve, lamenting more loudly as each re-examination passed him by. As a non-combatant, he attained the rank of major, with the usual decorations; and, with every day that pressed the war deeper into past history, his share in it became more significant.

Max jerked himself upright. For several days the *Koh-i-nor* would be in wireless communication with England; he had been stampeded into accepting Sheridan's proposal, but it was not too late for him to reconsider it. Auriol should decide.

"I'm droppin' Tony here," Max told Kenneth Doyle, as the car turned from the embankment into the Temple. "Where d'you want to be parked?"

"The Colonial Office, if it's not out of your way. Where are you going?"

"I promised to let Mrs. Sheridan know how things had gone off."

Doyle waited till Tony Rushforth had got out and then turned to Max with a whimsical smile.

"Peter Orpington told me that Sheridan was getting himself into rather a bad mess," he began. "Have you heard anything? He didn't tell me the woman's name, but I gather he's taking six months abroad while things blow over."

"News to me," Max answered. "I should never be surprised . . ." Remembering opportunely that the Doyles were believed to be heading for the divorce-court, he checked on the brink of becoming censorious. "It would explain why he was so ready to go."

"That's what *I* felt. It's the only reason that will hold water. He can't *expect* to do himself any good. However, that's *his* funeral. I must plead guilty to a certain feeling of relief when we said good-bye. . . ."

II

"A CERTAIN feeling of relief" was the phrase that Sheridan's "director of intelligence" was fain to use after a week spent with his ear to the ground, his finger on the public pulse and his eye on the undulation of opinion. Friends and enemies, devotees and sceptics made common cause in protesting that no one topic, were it the tomb of Tutankhamen or the state of unemployment, should occupy more than a fixed number of columns for a fixed number of days. In the unchanging cycle of popular interest the season had come again for discussing whether insanity should be a defence against an indictment for murder and whether a readily intelligible annoyance in the mind of an injured husband constituted insanity. If, in six months' time, Mr. Sheridan reported that he had a cure for all human ills, the public would give him a patient hearing, but the public required six months' rest after its late excitement and enthusiasm.

"Sheridan didn't leave a moment too soon," Lord Otway told Max, when they met by accident in the City. "Another week; and his prestige would have evaporated. As it is . . . Faith-healing, Max, is a very interesting process when you see it applied to a mass of dissimilar people. Since your respected chief undertook to cure us, there's been an extraordinary change of temper in the City. It began on the stock exchange: business suddenly became brisker. Then it spread to the issue-houses: a proposition that couldn't be entertained yesterday is being considered hopefully to-day. The banks followed; then came the merchants; then the retailers. The manufacturers will be the next. Every one seems to have made up his mind that a boom is coming; the papers will repeat it; and the boom will come. We're curing ourselves."

"How long will it take," Max asked, "before unemployment begins to fall?"

Something must indeed be happening when Lord Otway broke his habitual silence to express an opinion!

"It's falling already. The moment people heard the word 'boom', they decided to risk taking on a few more men, working longer time, accumulating stocks against the orders that would come. Their competitors did the same; *they* didn't want to be left out when the good time came. Case in point!" he confided. "I wanted two more gardeners at Lokshott, where I've deliberately been keeping things rather short. I felt I was justified, if we were going to have a good year at last. Was there a gardener to be found within a radius of twenty miles?

My neighbours too felt justified in spreading themselves a bit."

"But you don't lay all this at my chief's door?"

"It's a condition of our credit system. We live and trade on credit, which is another word for faith: if we believe we're sick, we become sick; if we believe we're well, we become well. Sometimes, I confess, I'm rather frightened: I feel that we're governed by an autocrat and the autocrat a neurotic woman. Credit . . . It's the sum-total of all our foresight, experience and judgement; *and* of our prejudices, follies, fears. You never know the mood you'll find her in. There'd be a panic if you put a communist at the Exchequer; and there'll be a boom as the result of your chief's mission."

"May I quote you as saying that?"

"If you think my opinion's more valuable by a farthing than that of the first hawker in the street," laughed Lord Otway.

Max clutched eagerly at this single ear of enthusiasm in a harvest of indifference and considered the phrasing of his first report. He was on his way to visit Mrs. Sheridan and did not relish conveying to her, however diplomatically, that every one he met was sick and tired of her husband's name. Truth to tell, though they were old friends, he did not relish these visits. From the day when he was considered old enough to profit by mature advice, he had been taught by Sir Mark that a man's relations with his wife were unintelligible to other men and should be accepted when they could not be ignored. The harder such advice might be to follow, the more urgent was the need to follow it. So primed, Max always —in his own phrase—"ran in a hood" when he met Laura Sheridan, though any one who had worked in the same room with Evelyn Colthurst could lay long odds who paid for her clothes. He could easily have supplied, from guess-work, a name for the blank place which

Kenneth Doyle had left in his story of a threatened scandal, but it was not the business of Sheridan's "director of intelligence" to enquire into Sheridan's relations with his personal secretary.

"I'm not paid to know things before I'm told," Max decided as he rang the bell.

Mrs. Sheridan was at home—he could not recall her having ever been out to him—she was disengaged; and she would be delighted to see him if he would excuse a muddle.

Coming into the drawing-room with a vague misgiving that she would expect him to produce a cable, he found her half-buried in pattern-books, planning ambitious schemes of decoration.

"But you must promise not to say a word about it in your letters!" she begged. "I want it to be a surprise. For one reason or another we've drifted on, year after year, talking as much as you like, but never *doing* anything. . . . I felt this was the opportunity for a big effort. When he comes back, he won't know it's the same house."

Max carried one of the pattern-books to a window and pretended to interest himself in her colour-scheme. Laura was in high spirits; and her eagerness made her seem many years younger. It was strange that she should be better in health, steadier in nerves—and therefore a gayer companion and a more attractive woman—the moment she was separated from the man she wanted to attract. Sheridan frightened and humiliated her; she became over-anxious to please; and this provoked him to brutality and fresh humiliations. They would get on admirably, Max decided, if they never met; but, almost before Sheridan had sailed, she was making plans for his return, telling herself that this time, *this* time everything was going to be different.

"You've chosen some jolly things," said Max, "but I like the house as it is."

"So do I, but I don't think Ambrose . . ."

It was idle to tell her that Ambrose could not be coaxed from indifference by a display of fresh paint or of new dresses.

"I came to see if you had any message. I'm sendin' him a report on things in general. The last thing he said was that I was to tell him how you were."

Laura's eyes brightened at the jejune message. In some phase of their life Ambrose had really cared to know how she was; and it was inconceivable to her now that he had only been keeping up appearances before a secretary!

"Stay and have some dinner with me," she begged; and Max glimpsed the radiant face of a girl newly in love and burning to tell him her secret, a girl of beauty and passion, who had only loved one man.

"Almost any other evenin'!" he begged. "To-night I'm dinin' with the Otways."

"Oh, are they back?"

"I don't think they went abroad after all. I ran across Otway in the City this afternoon; and yesterday I had a line from Auriol, callin' for all the latest news. If I may have the letters . . ."

"They're in the work-room. You're communicating by cable, I suppose? If I write . . ."

"You'll meet him on the way back. If it's anything urgent, I'll code it for you."

"Oh, thanks! There's no hurry. Come and see me before you go."

III

WHILE Max worked his way through the day's letters, Mrs. Sheridan tried to finish the one on which she had been intermittently engaged ever since her husband sailed.

"*You pride yourself on looking facts in the face,*" she wrote, "*but* believe *me you are not facing facts if you think* *people will tolerate what you propose. If you are forgiven the divorce, you would not be forgiven the remarriage: everybody would see that the one was a stepping-stone to the other. Miss Otway's position, even more her age . . ."*

It was impossible to go on for the present. The name of Auriol Otway, even when Laura herself employed it, broke down her self-control; though she had no personal antipathy to the unhappy girl, her tongue tripped and her hands trembled whenever she thought of her. Fortunately, Max had noticed nothing; but, then, Max seemed to be one of the shrewd, observant people who never saw what lay beneath their noses; or else he was of those who thought within fixed dimensions. Only in a world of four dimensions could he imagine that a girl of Auriol's upbringing might become infatuated with a married man twice her age or that such a man might jeopardize his career for a schoolgirl. There were moments when Laura wanted to cry "*Wake up! It's all a horrible dream!*" but she could never persuade herself that she or Ambrose had been dreaming when he declared his intentions in the presence of Tony and Mr. Livingstone. "Not a thing one can argue about . . . I want a copy of this letter. . . . Face the position frankly . . . I shan't need you again to-day, Miss Colthurst. . . . Six months . . . An honest trial: no communication of any kind. Otway's stipulation. The least one could do . . . If every one's of the same mind in six months' time . . ." And then the ghastly, glib sophistry about a marriage that had in fact come to an end ten years before! They were wide-awake as they listened, even if he had somehow paralysed their wills. She was not dreaming when she said that she understood. The girl, presumably, was not dreaming when she promised to come to him if he still wanted her.

When her hand was steady, Laura took up her pen again:

"I am trying to keep all personal feelings on one side. You cannot realize the results of what you contemplate; and I feel that justifies me in opposing your wishes."

Dare she say that she refused to carry out his wishes? At one point in that hideous debate Livingstone had said: "Before we go any farther, I should like to hear Mrs. Sheridan's views. In the ultimate analysis she controls the situation." At another point her brother had plucked up courage to say: "No one can compel her to divorce you." Ambrose, without arrogance, without menace, had been content to answer: "When the time comes, if we're still of the same mind, I don't think she will want to stand in my way." The words were deliberately indefinite. He might, when "the time" came, appeal to her good-nature; he might explode into a threat that, unless he got his way, he would abandon his life's work; he might torture her with his tongue; or, as once before, he might starve her. Desperately though she tried to forget it, Laura would always remember her one attempted revolt, when Ambrose dictated a succession of letters in which she was made to withdraw her patronage and her subscriptions from her various charities. She had capitulated after the third letter.

"*I don't think she will want to stand in my way.* She dared not refuse him when the time came; and in the ultimate analysis the situation was controlled, through her, by Ambrose. Perhaps Miss Otway—she shivered involuntarily at the name of this girl with the devilish power over her husband—perhaps Miss Otway would change her mind in six months; perhaps her parents would coerce her. In six months Ambrose himself might have come to his senses. If not, the tragedy must be played out. When the time came, Laura could not stand in the way, if she wished; and only those who had done what she feared to do were entitled to call her a coward.

Locking the unfinished letter in a drawer, she went down to the work-room and was unreasonably angered to find Max sitting in her husband's chair. He stood up, as she came in; and she contrived to slip between him and the chair, so that he had to draw up another. How petty she would seem to him, how sentimental to Ambrose, if they knew that the work-room and dressing-room were kept as he had left them and that sometimes she crept in by night and talked as though he were there!

"I shan't write by this mail," she told Max. "There's so little to say in a week. And I've been so busy about the house . . ."

"You're lookin' tired, Laura," he interrupted.

"Am I? I'm feeling rather forlorn," she admitted frankly. "This is the first time my husband has ever been away without me for more than about a week. When will you come and keep me company, Max?"

"Any night after this. I want to have a long talk with you. The chief's very keen to know from day to day what people are sayin' about the mission. People talk to you, I make no doubt . . ."

"And I to them!" cried Laura. Max saw with surprise that her lassitude had dropped from her and that her sombre eyes were alight with the passion of a zealot. "Do you want what the reporters call a 'message'?" she laughed. "Tell him that, though he's only been gone a week, the boom is beginning! It doesn't matter now whether Lord Orpington set a trap, whether Ambrose walked into it. He's restored people's confidence in themselves. If they want a leader, he'll lead them. There's been nothing like it since the first weeks of the war, when Lord Kitchener took charge and the whole country breathed freely again."

Max, who had been a schoolboy when war broke out, tried to recall the Kitchener myth before it began to crumble.

"I hope he don't crash like poor old K.," he muttered.

" He won't ! He understands the people, which Lord K. never did, however much the people idolized him. When will people *begin* to see that your modern leader is a new creation ? The cabinet and the House and the Albert Hall go for nothing nowadays. The future lies with the man who understands publicity and propaganda : newspapers, films, broadcasting. That's why Ambrose *must* win against men who despise the press and think it vulgar to advertise. That's why the old school hates him. But that's why the 'mob', as the old school calls it, believes in him and acts on its belief."

Max thought over her answer and nodded slowly. He had not realized that she was interested in politics. When she talked of public affairs, he had always imagined that she was echoing her husband, but her tone now made him wonder whether her husband did not sometimes echo her.

" You think Peter Orpington will be hoist with his own petard or whatever the gadget's called ? " he asked. " That means the cabinet for your husband."

" Unless something unexpected happens. The government might fall. Ambrose might say or do something . . . He's impetuous, you know ; and, though Mr. Livingstone or I can usually pull him up, there's no one to check him now. But I shall make you late for your dinner if I go on talking."

When Max had taken his leave, Laura went back to the work-room and set her husband's chair in its accustomed place. It was a wooden arm-chair, with a loose leather cushion. When or where he had bought it she could not recall, but for half-a-dozen years before they settled in London it had accompanied them in their wanderings. And in the days when Ambrose had to make money he had sat in it, after the day's work was done, bombarding her with questions. In those days, before he withdrew his confidence from her, she was made to represent average opinion : he would set a dozen newspapers before her and ask which she liked best, and why, and what was amiss with the others. " If you had five pounds a year to throw away, how would you spend it ? " he was fond of enquiring. And his first fortune had been drawn from the pockets of those who led dull lives and had five or three pounds a year to spend in anodynes. To them he sold cheap cameras and gramophones, then sewing-machines, bicycles and furniture for which they paid by instalments. " What kind of magazine would you like best," he had asked her, " if you could only afford one ? . . . I'm tired after a day at the office ; you're tired after doing the house and putting the children to bed." . . .

Laura winced and tried to think of the other problems he had flung at her. Fountain-pens ? Safety-razors ? Her mind came back obstinately to the hypothetical children she was supposed to have put to bed. When she married Ambrose, there was no question of her having a family. Later, as they hurried about the world, selling wherever they found a scarcity and buying wherever there was a glut, they had to travel alone and light. When they settled in England, it would be time enough, Ambrose told her ; but they found, when at last they settled in England, that he had made his first great miscalculation. And from the moment that she failed him he had begun to lose interest in her.

Hurrying to her room, Laura began to dress for dinner. Ambrose had never reproached her ; but once, in taking stock, he had wondered aloud why he troubled to go on making money when they already had more than they needed for just the two of them. Once, when a party whip had hinted at the attractions of a baronetcy, Ambrose had asked impatiently what good a baronetcy was to him. Had there been children, he would not have wanted to leave her. Had there been children, she could have parted from him more easily. Had there been children, she would not have so irrevocably lavished on him the devotion that should have been theirs.

IV

On his way to Manchester Square, Max calculated that he had not dined with the Otways since the night of Auriol's birthday-party.

Had he been invited, he could not have gone till the mission was safely aboard; but something in Auriol's manner at their last meeting warned him that they would be wise to have a rest from each other. She was becoming rather too much of a politician and rather too intolerant of any one who did not share her latest passion. Max wished he could bring her back to her mood of the days before Cambridge set up the fancy that she had a vocation to reform the world. Perhaps she would be more human now that Sheridan was no longer at hand to flatter her. "Relief?" Max asked himself. Yes, he must range himself with those who breathed more easily now that they had seen the last of Sheridan for six months.

He was shewn into Auriol's sitting-room and greeted with an apology for the smallness of the party.

"Only you and me, Max," she explained. "I thought you might like to take me on to Bellamy's afterwards."

"I'd love to. Never thought I should have you all to myself. What happened to the Italian tour?"

"It didn't come off. For one reason or another, the family had been getting on my nerves and I'd been getting on the nerves of the family. It happens like that sometimes. Mummie thought it would be a good thing if I had a change; and, when Italy was suggested, I jumped at it. Then I saw that it would only be a change from bad to worse. I should still be surrounded by family, still getting on every one's nerves, with all the added horrors of foreign trains and hotels. So I cried off and sent the family without me."

"And you're all alone?"

Auriol nodded and turned away to tidy her writing-table:

"All alone and rather out of love with life. Horribly, horribly lonely, to begin with . . ."

"Well, my dear, we can soon cure *that!*"

She bent over his chair and kissed his cheek:

"Dear old Max! Will you adopt me till the family comes back? Take me racing! Ask me to stay with your adorable father at Newmarket! He always makes such a delightful fuss of me; and I *want* some one to make a fuss of me."

"I'll send him a wire to-morrow. You promise you won't throw me over for him, Auriol?"

"If I married either of you, I should certainly choose Sir Mark; partly because I'm very fond of him and partly to shew what a good step-mother I should make for you. As a matter of fact, I'm not going to marry either of you. It's the Guineas meeting, isn't it, Max? D'you really think he'll have room for me? If I don't have a change of ideas, I really think we shall have a family quarrel."

"But what's the row?"

Auriol raked her hair impatiently and seated herself on the arm of his chair:

"Oh, it's too long a story to tell you now. I suppose it's because I've grown up since the war and all their ideas are pre-war, very faintly tinged by the war. Mother never says the same thing two minutes running, so you're bound to find her on your side occasionally . . ."

"Like standin' still when you're tight and waitin' to catch the house next time round."

"The rest of them just look on life from a different angle. I don't mind that. I'd let them go their way if they'd let me go mine, but they won't. And so we seem to wrangle about everything. Which I hate. However . . . Tell me what you've been doing with yourself. I suppose you've downed tools till Mr. Sheridan comes back?"

" Don't you think it ! "

He described his interviews with Mrs. Sheridan and Lord Orpington, not sorry of the opportunity to shew that his duties extended beyond filing letters and answering the telephone, even though native honesty kept him from magnifying the dignity or a " director of intelligence". In his new part, however, he could give Auriol political gossip that was fresh to her and describe the departure of the mission as an eye-witness. When he asked whether he should cling to his new position, she convinced him that he could not leave Mr. Sheridan until a successor had been appointed.

At ten o'clock, when he reminded her that they were to dance at Bellamy's, he found that she had changed her mind.

" It's more fun here," she decided, curling herself on a cushion at his feet. " You're being quite interesting and intelligent. Tell me your *own* opinion, Max, not what other people say. About Mr. Sheridan, I mean."

" I'll tell *you* what I'm going to tell *him*. In one word. *Relief*. The politicians of every shade are relieved that he's gone. And not only the politicians. His wife. His humble secretary. He's a man you want a holiday from. I don't know how well you know him . . ."

" I feel relieved, too," Auriol answered thoughtfully. " He exhausts me."

" Relief. I shall tell him that and leave him to make what he likes of it," Max continued. " He'll take it as a tremendous compliment. He'll think they're afraid of him. He won't see that people like Standish and Orpington and your father are glad to be rid of him because they distrust him."

By defending him, Auriol would only check the flow of Max's candour. She contented herself with saying :

" I don't know why they should."

" Instinct. And therefore you can't argue with it.

The other night at the Orpingtons' he was bindin' spells. The speech was nothing remarkable, but I talked to about fifty people afterwards and he had 'em cold. He could do what he liked, but they still didn't trust him. And that's what's goin' to bring him down, if anything does. He's bin lookin' a bit tucked up lately. If people don't believe in you, there comes a time when you don't believe in yourself. You want inspirin' . . ."

"And that's just the one thing . . ." Auriol began. "Does he ever confide in you, Max ?"

"I don't think he confides in any one, unless it's Livingstone. When you've climbed as high as that, you're pretty much by yourself."

"And Mrs. Sheridan . . ."

"Well, I respect her judgement—and so does he, by the way—but I can't see her inspirin' anybody. All the drivin'-force has to come from him. I don't know how long he can keep it up . . ."

V

He lapsed into silence and began to stroke Auriol's head.

"*You* believe in him, don't you ?" she asked.

"Yes. If he could get people's confidence as Ll.-G. got it in the war . . . The confidence of his colleagues, I mean. And if he had some one always urgin' him on . . ."

"Mrs. Sheridan . . ."

"He's worn Laura out. Well, Auriol, I must be goin'. I'll fix things about Newmarket. . ."

"You mustn't go till you've seen my new picture."

She jumped up and unpacked the black-and-white original of the cartoon in which Ambrose Sheridan was depicted in conversation with the shade of Napoleon.

"'*They tried to get rid of me too*'," Max read.

"Mr. Sheridan sent me that as a parting present," she explained. "If I could spare it, I'd send it back as the best comment on the mission."

"You think he's comin' back to gobble 'em all up? Well, he'll have a dam' good shot. Thank the Lord he won't be back for six months; I may be able to see somethin' of you. Kiss me good-night, Auriol, and *coué* yourself that you're goin' to enjoy Newmarket. I don't like to see you lookin' so long in the face and sayin' that every one gets on your nerves . . ."

Auriol jumped up and threw her arms round his neck:

"I didn't say every one. I except you, expressly. You're a darling, Max; I always feel comfortable with you and I should always come to you in trouble. You can make as much fuss of me as you like: I need it. Good-night, my dear! Bless you!"

"Good-night! I say! Auriol! 'Director of intelligence' sounds no end of a fine thing, especially if you suspect you're half-witted. Don't be carried away by the name, though. It's the same old job and the same old screw. Only fair to tell you. And I hope it's not a disappointment."

"My dear, I'm only disappointed if you are."

"Well, truth to tell, I *am*. I was hopin' for somethin' better, so that we could fix things up."

"But, Max . . ."

"All right! You needn't say it! I shan't whisper a word till I've got something to offer. I'm sorry, Auriol. I'm doin' my best. I'm tryin' to be patient."

"It would really be better if you admitted it was hopeless."

"But that's just what I won't do!"

CHAPTER III

"Pulp"

"... The seed o' the apple-tree
Brings forth another tree which bears a crab:
'Tis the great gardener grafts the excellence
On wildings where he will."
ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society.*

I

BEFORE she went to bed, Auriol wrote to tell her mother of the invitation to Newmarket.

Ever since the Otways had left for Rome, she had been looking for an excuse to establish communications without compromising her dignity; and more than once, drifting solitarily from one empty room to another, she had been tempted to let her dignity take care of itself. Nothing—or at least almost nothing—was worth this atmosphere of pained surprise. And yet, if she said, "*Oh, do for goodness' sake let's all be friends again!*" Colin or Imogen would ask, with a magisterial lift of their eyebrows if not in words, whether this meant that she had come to her senses about Sheridan. Some one's mutter would be overheard; some one else, in that inquisitive party at the embassy, would gasp: "*Not* Ambrose *Sheridan? And* Auriol? *Oh, my Lord . . . !*"

And then, Auriol knew herself well enough to admit candidly, she would do something terrible out of sheer contrariety. Her mother sometimes told her that she was a changeling; and there were times when Auriol herself could detect no single characteristic that she held in common with her nearest blood-relations. "*What? Did the hand, then, of the Potter shake?*" she whispered. On the night of her birthday it was Colin, buttoning the family honour to his breast, who drove her farther than she had ever intended to go. To be sure, no one was committed even now: " if we're both of the same mind in six months' time " was the condition which Ambrose laid down and she intended to think things over very carefully in the next six months. At the end she hoped to be calm, balanced and wise; but, if people assailed Ambrose behind his back, personally or politically, she would defend him to the last drop of her blood.

If people spied and whispered and worried and fussed . . .

II

"*Max has been dining* . ." she began, spontaneously abrupt, then realized that every word must be written as thoughtfully as it would be read. Max's very name was enough to make some one say: "*Now, if she'd marry* him . . .", some one else remember that they had once pretended to be engaged.

"*Feeling rather tired of my own company,*" she began again, less spontaneously, "*I invited Max to dine . . .*"

That would not do, either. If she confessed that she was lonely, some one would say: "*We oughtn't to have left her by herself,*" some one else would mutter that she really was taking this Sheridan business to heart.

Anticipating the telegram which Sir Mark would send her next day, she announced that she was going to stay with the Hendrys the following week. That pushed Max aside to make way for his father, who had in fact invited her a dozen times. Between the lines of such a statement there was surely nothing for these dear, troubled eyes to read? And yet there was! Max dining: then the Sheridan peril could not be so deadly after all, or she would not send for Max the moment she felt lonely.

Sir Mark inviting her to Newmarket: plainly a hint that, if she and Max ever renewed their shadowy engagenent, there would be no objection on the Hendry side. The invitation accepted; an indisputable proof that poor, silly little Auriol had swung back in violent reaction! She was putting Max through his paces, refreshing her memories of Sir Mark and making the acquaintance of Conway House: a clear "case"! They would be aggrieved when they came back from Rome to find that she was not already engaged.

For a time Auriol abandoned the idea of writing, but some interpretation more fantastic still would be applied to her visit if they heard of it independently. She could imagine the scene in the embassy when some one reported that she had been to Newmarket without telling her parents. "*Any news of Auriol? Ah, then I can give you some! She's been staying with old Mark Hendry for the Guineas meeting. I've just had a letter from my boy, who saw her there . . .*"

Auriol decided that she must write; but, before making another attempt, she paused to consider what Sir Mark and Max would think of her impetuous self-invitation. How much did Max understand? She had told him a score of times, that night included, that she could never marry him. If he decided that she was worth keeping as a friend, they could be friends without misunderstanding.

"*I have never been to Newmarket,*" she wrote in the desperation of impatience and exhaustion. "*I'm going next week. Sir Mark and Max have invited me again and again, but I've never been able to manage it before. This is my only news, so you must make up by telling me all yours. I hope you're enjoying yourselves, but I should like to think you were missing me a little. I'm looking forward very much to seeing you again; and, to touch for one moment on a painful subject, I think there's* *just one thing we'd better not discuss. I'm not going to make you unhappy and I'm not going to make myself unhappy, if I can possibly avoid it. There can't be any convulsions for six months; and in that time I shall consider very carefully what my feelings really are. At present I can't tell you. Of course, I admire A. tremendously; I believe in him; and I'm very fond of him. I'll go farther and say I think he's the one man who can clear up the mess left by the war (a thing that the* tinkerers *have never attempted!); and I think, in all modesty, that I have the power of helping him. That's all; and I know all the arguments against what we've talked of doing. It's a straight issue; and I* should *be able to make a sensible decision one way or the other. But we must* all *be sensible,* all *keep our heads. When people say that A.'s gutter-bred or unreliable or old enough to be my father, I lose my judgement and see him simply as a genius, a man head and shoulders above all the other men I've ever met,* my *man. Don't let's* mention *this subject for six months."*

Next day a telegram of urgent welcome arrived from Sir Mark; and at the beginning of the following week Max motored her to Suffolk. On the way down she was warned not to expect more than a bachelor party and rough comfort; and Auriol, who had only raced hitherto from house-parties in the neighbourhood of Ascot and Goodwood, observed a subtile change in the manner of her escort as they drew near to Conway House. This, she discovered in a sense that she had not realized before, was Max's home. Of the thin-legged, keen-faced throng in the High Street fully half waved to him as he drove by; he pointed out celebrities and bewildered her with anecdotes of owners and trainers whose names she only knew from the papers; he promised or threatened that she should be taken to see his father's horses working next day on the Heath; and he recited pedigrees till she silenced him by saying that he was inventing them.

"Does anybody here ever talk of anything *except* horses?" she enquired with misgiving.

"Not much. You wouldn't live in Newmarket unless you were fairly keen."

"And you, I suppose . . . ?"

Max laughed with secret happiness:

"If I had my way, I'd do nothin' else. Four or five brood-mares; nominations to the best sires of the year; and *then* begin. Breedin', trainin'. If I didn't happen to turn the scale at twelve-six when I'm down to skin and bone, I'd *ride* too. Well, I don't suppose I shall ever have horses of my own, so the next best thing is to manage some one else's. I bin tryin' to interest Sheridan. God knows, he can afford it! George Lambton! There's a man I envy! If I had a stable of horses like his . . . It's the perfect life. It's the only life. Here we are! You observe my poor old father has the house decorated throughout in his racin'-colours: green eiderdowns and white pillows: *cointreau* and *crème-de-menthe* for breakfast. You must pretend to take it seriously for his sake, Auriol. I have what the medicos call my 'lucid intervals', but my poor old father . . . No!"

III

Sir Mark was awaiting them in the hall, behind a table loaded with decanters.

Side by side with Max, well-fed and regularly exercised, shrewd and almost illiterate, hospitable and awkward, he was more like a friendly elder brother than a father. The house, at first sight, was one-third tavern, one-third office and one-third undergraduate diggings. At some period before Auriol came to know the family, there had existed a Lady Hendry, but she had died without leaving a mark on her husband, her son or a house that could never have been hers. The billiard-room, which was used for every purpose but billiards, the bedrooms, which were strictly and literally rooms for beds and with beds, never seemed to have known the beautifying touch of a woman's hand. Auriol looked about her and drew a deep breath: this was going to be one of the hardest weeks she had known.

Then her sense of humour came to her rescue. She tried to imagine the confidential report which she would have written to her mother if in fact she had come to be shewn off to Sir Mark and to have Conway House shewn off to her. "Poisonous" rose to her lips as the obvious epithet for her surroundings; and she blushed guiltily when Max, meeting her at the foot of the stairs and pushing a whiskey-and-soda at her as though nobody was allowed to pass through the hall without a whiskey-and-soda, murmured:

"Poisonous sort of place, isn't it?"

"It's a beautifully airy bedroom you've given me," she answered.

"I hope the wall-paper won't keep you awake," said Sir Mark. "Fact of the matter is, we only use the place as an hotel. I'm in the stables or on the training-grounds so much of the time. Then you have eight weeks' racing every year. And the sales. You don't have much leisure for domesticity."

"Few men work harder to lose money," said Max disrespectfully. "This is the first time Auriol's been to Newmarket, sir, and she wants to see everything. It's goin' to be a great experience for us all. She thinks we're complete barbarians; and I think she's much too highly civilized. By the end of the week we shall be readin' Hansard at meals and she'll be takin' the Book of Form to bed with her. What about a brief inspection before the light goes?"

Auriol submitted to being led round an endless succession of boxes, at the doors of which she was expected to invent individual appreciation of horses that looked distractingly alike. She listened uncomprehendingly at dinner while Sir Mark discoursed of the next day's sales; and, until she could make an excuse for going to bed, she floundered helplessly in the wake of scandalous confidences about trainers who accepted commissions and jockeys who had overstepped the limits of conventional corruption. From time to time she reminded herself that her own hobbies were probably as tiresome to other people as this horse-flesh obsession to her; once or twice she fancied that the drive from London in an open car had tired her; perilously often she caught herself whispering that this, even four days of this, must come to an end. At half-past ten, she excused herself.

Max broke off a heated criticism of the official handicapper to light her up to her room.

"Everything you want?" he enquired at the door. "Can't tell you how jolly it is to have you here, Auriol! I want you to enjoy every moment of the time. It's very quiet, I'm afraid, with only my poor old father and me, but a little quiet won't do you any harm. You bin' gaddin' about too much, my child? I thought you looked overtrained the other night. And I don't like to hear you sayin' that people get on your nerves. I may tell you that got on *my* nerves. Couldn't sleep all night . . ."

"Now, my dear Max . . ." she protested.

"It's gospel truth, swelp me. I'm fond of you, Auriol, though you don't seem to realize it, and I'd cut the heart out of your own sainted mother if I thought she was bein' a bore to you. Nothin' up, is there?"

Auriol hesitated and then stood on tip-toe to kiss him: "Nothing that you can remedy, Max."

"I'd sooner you'd said there was nothin' at all. And, if there *is* anythin', I wish you'd tell me."

With one of his hands supporting her and the other gently smoothing her hair back from her forehead, Auriol felt suddenly at peace.

" But I've promised to come to you if I'm ever in any trouble. You'd always be sweet and you'd always see me through. *I'm* very fond of *you*, Max, though you don't seem to realize it."

" I always feel you regard me as the village idiot," he informed her frankly and without malice.

" My dear, I don't. I sometimes regard you as the village idler. D'you *really* mean that, if you had all the money in the world, you'd waste your life idling about in a training-stable ? "

" If you think Stockbridge or Manton is a soft job, I'll take you there to see an average day's work. I'll take you out on the Heath before breakfast to-morrow . . ."

Auriol dammed his vehemence with a kiss and bade him good-night. She was in bed when Sir Mark turned out to see his horses at work and still in bed when Max departed to see sold or ordered out of the ring a succession of animals that he had no faintest chance of buying. When the three of them met for an early luncheon, she felt equal to running level with them for the rest of the day, but her first moment of genuine elation came as she walked to the paddock before the first race and saw Lord Orpington's cornflower-blue Rolls-Royce drawn up beside the Jockey Club stand.

" Blue Peter ! " she exclaimed with the delight of one who finds a friend in a hostile land.

The delight was not lost on Max. In a moment, he predicted wistfully, she would be asking who was going to be sent as governor to the Seychelles and why the Kenya government, if it did not want Indian labour for itself, could not divert it to the West Indies, where it was needed. He seemed to have no seat or hands for riding her hobbies.

As she spoke, Lord Orpington swung into the enclosure.

" Hullo, Auriol ! And Max ! A bone to pick with you, Max," he added with a frown. " Are you acting as regent for Sheridan? If you are, I tell you frankly that I should like a rest from his precious papers. I'm quite aware he doesn't love me; and he probably sees that I get my stick free and slip a hand over my watch when I meet him in a lonely lane at night. I thought we'd called a truce, though: I don't attack him behind his back and I'm damned if I see why his papers should make offensive personal remarks about me."

"I'm afraid I don't touch that end of the business," said Max.

He glanced at Auriol. She was listening with an eagerness which he never succeeded in arousing.

"Well, if you'll find me the responsible man, I'll tell him what I think of him," said Lord Orpington. "The way I do my work is primarily a matter for the P.M. If the House doesn't like it, I can be questioned and censured. I don't allow inky scribes to tell me I'm neglecting my office to win races. My clothes are my own affair. I'm sick of being told I'm a 'picturesque personality'. I'm not blaming you, but I do charge you as a friend to find the right man and tell him this must stop. It's not clean fighting, as I understand it."

IV

ONCE more disclaiming all influence over the Sheridan press, Max adroitly set Auriol to smooth the colonial secretary's ruffled plumage.

Lord Orpington, he was confident, could never resist a pretty, well-dressed girl; and Max was vaguely apprehensive that she was not surrendering to the charms of Newmarket so quickly as he had hoped. When he explained that people came here to race seriously, Auriol expressed regret that serious racing should necessitate dowdy dressing. He promised her a braver display for the Two Thousand Guineas, also "such a society-mob that you can't move"; and Auriol sacrificed his good opinion to her passion for truth by telling him that, while horses were an obvious necessity, she raced for excitement and in the hope of making money and for the chance of seeing her friends.

"Now I suppose I've put myself beyond the pale," she laughed impenitently.

To challenge her confession was beyond Max's powers of flattery. Auriol wheedled tips out of uncommunicative owners instead of inspecting the horses in the ring. She talked politics with Lord Orpington when she should have watched the horses going down. And she turned her back on the course when she had no bet.

"You'll be bitten before you know it," Max prophesied without much conviction.

The starting-bell was ringing for the most important race of the day; and she had begged him, without the least desire to make a nuisance of herself, to take her where she could sit down in peace and have a cup of tea.

"I doubt it! Don't think I'm not enjoying myself, because I am; but I wouldn't give two pins to breed a Derby winner or train him or ride him or lead him in. I should like to be the first woman member of the Jockey Club: that would be a unique achievement. But, to me, breeding blood-stock is only like making motor-cars. A wonderful industry. Very important. I'd never be head of the most wonderful industry in the world, though, if I could be in a position to control *all* the industries."

"If I knew what *did* interest you . . ." Max began humbly.

The glazed side of the bleak tea-room was dark with the backs of less indifferent race-goers, struggling for places at the top of the stand. He could hear the names of the horses called as they emerged from the Dip; and it was only by pushing his stick and glasses out of reach that he could overcome the temptation to dash outside.

"I'm only interested in human beings," Auriol answered reflectively. " The way they're governed and the countries where they collect and the way the different countries behave to each other. I believe this is one of the most interesting times in the history of the world," she continued with shining eyes. " I'm thankful to be alive! We're breaking up, as Europe broke up after the French Revolution, after the discovery of America, after the fall of the Roman Empire. A new world has to be made. Every one's trying his hand. I want to meet them all, I want to try *mine!* "

The insistent clangour of the bell had been followed by unearthly silence. Now the silence was being broken by assured voices that announced : " Well, the favourite's beat, any way." " He's coming again ! " " What's this on the rails ? " " The favourite wins ! " " Oh, easily ! " . . . " Fourteen, three, twenty-nine. What's twenty-nine ? Featherbed ? Never heard of the brute ! "

" You should have been at that dinner Blue Peter gave Sheridan," said Max. " Geoffrey Mallock called 'em the saviours of society. . . If Parachute goes in this next race, it ought to be a safe thing. He ran second to Fair and False at Manchester, givin' ten pounds ; and now he's meetin' Gamester at level weights. You get a line on Gamester through Night of Stars . . ."

" Darling Max, I don't understand a word you're saying ! And I don't believe you do either."

" But it's perfectly simple ! "

" Not to me, my dear. We live in different worlds. I can never make out why we're so fond of each other."

Max knitted his brows in unaccustomed thought and then broke into a grin :

" Because we can take each other without engagements and forfeits. It's you I want, Auriol, and, if you care to save society in your spare time, bless you, *I* shan't object. And I don't suppose you'll object if I disguise myself as a rat-catcher and mingle with the joyous throng on the Heath from time to time. I couldn't afford to race properly, if I married, unless our friend the cow *did* jump over the moon. It's a mistake for husbands and wives not to have interests of their own . . ."

"Interests! It's my *life!* I want to be in the heart of things all the while. 'Save society in your spare time.' I adore that phrase, Max."

They strolled out to the top of the stand as the numbers for the next race went up.

"Well, save it all the time," he suggested obligingly; then, with an effort: "This is the one thing I care about, but I'd drop it to-morrow if you put that as your reserve. I'd roll along and save society myself, if you'd shew me how. So long as I'm stuck to my present job, though . . ."

"I'm afraid you rather enjoy it, Max. Rent-free chambers in St. James', fair pay, light work, whatever holidays you like to take . . . I wish you shewed a little more ambition. . . . Your beloved Parachute is *not* going."

"Then Gamester will start about three to one on. Come and hear what the bookies are saying. Oh, my Lord! '*Take* nine to two.' I don't want to buy the perishin' horse."

On returning to Conway House after the last race, Auriol vanished to her room and wrote to tell her mother that she had arrived safely and was enjoying herself. Her awkward hosts atoned by their devotion for the undeniable discomforts of the house; and she derived vague satisfaction from the knowledge that, though this was Max's home, it would cease to be his home when Sir Mark died or sold the stud. Newmarket ceased to be Max's world in the moment when he offered to give up racing for her; and she was resolved that he should give it up, not for her, but for himself. Already that day she had seen too many young men with too little to do; and, from affection or knowledge, she was sure that Max had a future if only she or some one else could make him bestir himself. Had he only a little of the force which Ambrose possessed to superfluity, had Ambrose only a touch of that sympathy which made her feel warm and comfortable when she was with Max, what a wonderful combination they would make!

" '*Genius strategic of Caesar or Hannibal,*
'*Skill of Sir Garnet in thrashing a cannibal*' . . ."

she hummed. It was a pity that husbands could not be constructed like heavy dragoons; a pity that women could not have different husbands for different purposes, one to take them dancing when they were in the mood (Ambrose, she felt sure, never danced), one to read aloud to them when they were ill, one to be father of their children and one to be their partner in the business of public life. She could see herself helping Ambrose with his elections, presiding over his political dinners and managing his house for him, always with an audience, but she could not imagine anything more intimate. What would they discuss if they dined alone? What private interests had they in common, with that difference of age and upbringing? No doubt common interests would be born of a common life, but she could not at present picture Ambrose apart from the House of Commons, or a platform, or an office, or a carefully organized party, which he always harangued as though it were a public meeting. She could not think of him as "Ambrose". She wondered whether he would be very oppressive when he was off duty.

And Max? Without charm of address, without wit, without learning, Max contrived in some way to be a perfect companion for a holiday. He was good-looking, he was imperturbable, he was good-natured. He enjoyed everything when she was in the mood for enjoyment; and he was delightfully quiet and solicitous when she wanted a little peace.

A life of perpetual holiday, however, was a refinement of torment never imagined by Dante. . .

V

The husband who should be the father of her children was a creature Auriol had never tried to visualize.

She was not conscious of wanting children, though she was willing enough to bear them as an expected part of a well-regulated marriage. She was not interested in passion and fancied that most people made an unnecessary to-do, both in repelling and in embracing it. If a man wanted to kiss her, she did not mind—except for a ghastly week after his demobilization, when Max smoked American cigarettes!—and she would not mind if no one ever kissed her again.

She returned to her letter. "*Arrived in comfortable time for dinner. Hatfield, Baldock, Royston. Sir Mark and Max are being angelic, but I'm tired out trying not to make a fool of myself. I can see I'm not cut out for this sort of thing, whereas Max told me yesterday that, if he could attain his heart's desire by pressing a bell . . .*"

That was not quite the figure he had used; and Auriol paused to light a cigarette. On second thoughts, she decided to begin the letter anew. Every word must be written as carefully as it would be read; and, if she allowed her opening sentences to stand, some one would decide that she and Max would never hit it off together (more probably some one would say that it was useless to hope that Max would save her from Sheridan!). Well, they never would, unless the cow jumped over the moon and Max blossomed into something unrecognizable. It was surely fairer to him and to every one else for her to make plain that they could never be more than friends. Max really knew it; or, if he did not, no one could say she had not told him time and again. He knew it; but he would not face it, because it would hurt him. And she would not compel him to face it, because she would cut herself in two rather than hurt him. In six months' time, he might have to face it. And it would hurt them both. Perhaps, since he refused to face it now, he would then hint by a sneer or a frown that she had treated him shabbily. . . .

Auriol tore her letter into small pieces and marched to the door. As her fingers touched the handle, she heard a gentle knock, followed by the faint murmur of her own name.

" You up and about ? Oh, may I come in ? I thought you might be restin'. Seven races a day is always one too many. I thought you might like to know I'd just had a cable from Geoffrey. Alexandria. Mill-pond passage through the Bay. No casualties to date. And no news of any kind."

Max handed her the telegram and looked anxiously round the room to see that she had an adequate supply of towels and note-paper.

" I'm glad they've begun well," said Auriol. " Somehow . . . Mr. Sheridan and Geoffrey . . ."

" They'll be as thick as thieves by the time they come back. You all right, Auriol ? I've an idea that a small whiskey-and-soda wouldn't do you any harm."

" Horrible stuff ! I never touch it ! "

" A cocktail, then ? "

" I was trying to write a letter to mother. I can't. My brain's all pulpy. I'm afraid I'm a very unsatisfactory guest."

" Yes, my dear, you are. If you *must* know, I didn't invite you here because I thought you'd like it : I hoped it would be a bit of a change ; and every one cracks up the Newmarket air. There's something the matter, Auriol : my poor old father's quite distressed about you. Can't you tell me ? I'm no hand at a bed-side manner, but it might do you good to get it off your chest. One of these days I hope it'll be my duty, as well as my pleasure, to love, honour and cherish you . . ."

" Don't, Max ! "

" Does that worry you ? I'll never mention it again ! But as it's always simmerin' at the top of what I'm pleased to call my mind . . ."

Auriol glimpsed her opportunity and dived for it :

" It *does* worry me to think that you really believe . . . Max, if I told you I was going to marry some one else . . ."

" Are you ? "

" Heaven *knows !* But, if I did, you'd feel I'd let you down. *Wouldn't* you ? "

" No. Not havin' a head of my own, I believe tremendously in yours. If you told me that you'd thought it over very carefully and were convinced that Geoffrey Mallock, Bobbie Selhurst, any one was what I think is called your 'soul-mate', I'd shake you by both hands and wish you luck. I want to see you happy, my dear ! And you used to be simply bubblin' over. If I thought you'd be happy with the man in the moon, I'd fix up an introduction somehow. Don't you worry about me ! . . ."

" But I do ! "

Auriol found that she was still holding Geoffrey Mallock's telegram ; and, to gain time, she read it once more. " *Exceptionally smooth passage through bay mister Sheridan and all members mission well arriving Alexandria to-day proceeding to-night Mallock.*" She wished the cable had been delayed an hour or two : it would be so much easier to think of Max if she were not reminded of Ambrose. But for the telegram, she might have said : " *Oh, well, marry me if you want to.*" Max never pretended that she inspired him or that she was wonderful in any way, apart from her looks. He never pretended that he could not live without her ; but clumsily, touchingly, sincerely he made her feel that the world must be set revolving in another direction if its present movement dissatisfied her. He never asked anything for himself.

" Life would be a great deal easier if I wasn't so fond of you," she sighed.

" It might be a bit easier if you'd tell me what the trouble is."

" But I can't. My brain's in a state of pulp, as I told you before."

" Well, leave your rotten letters and go to bed for half-an-hour. I'd like to stay and talk to you . . ."

" You may."

" I'm goin' to be unselfish. Good-bye."

" Good-bye," Auriol murmured and then sighed, with a feeling not unlike despair.

As he walked to the door, she felt that the " pulpy " state of her brain had cost her an unrivalled opportunity.

CHAPTER IV

"*Six Months Elapse*"

"Take me—who know your mind, and mean your good,
With clearer brain and stouter arm than they,
Or you, or haply anybody else—
And make me master for the moment! Choose
What time, what power you trust me with: I too
Will choose as frankly ere I trust myself
With time and power: they must be adequate
To the end and aim, since mine the loss, with yours,
If means be wanting; once their worth approved,
Grant them, and I shall forthwith operate—
Ponder it well!—to the extremest stretch
O' the power you trust me: if with unsuccess,
God wills it, and there's nobody to blame."
ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society.*

I

THE Otways left Rome at the end of April and remained in London until the beginning of August.

They returned to an atmosphere of optimism which Lady Otway ascribed bluntly to the mildness of the spring weather and which every one else explained more ingeniously in the light of his own preconceptions. The ministerial press attributed the general good-humour to the knowledge that trade was reviving and explained that trade was reviving because a safe and stable government had at last restored public confidence. Week by week *The Constitutionalist* printed the number of days that Mr. Standish had held office and the number of unemployed who had been lifted into employment. It was an inference too obvious to be drawn that, if only

Mr. Standish remained long enough in power, there would be two jobs for every man

Speakers and writers on the labour side, unable to deny that exports were increasing, unemployment dwindling, foreign relations improving and the risk of war and revolution receding, pointed out that Mr. Standish was assuming credit for the work of his predecessors. If England was at amity with France, if Germany was walking erect into the comity of nations, if houses were springing up, if the cost of living was tumbling down, all this and much more could be traced to the brief and glorious rule of the first labour administration.

Sir Hyde Masterman, on behalf of a liberal party that was meagrely represented inside the House, claimed this industrial recovery as another triumph for free trade.

II

THE Sheridan press, taking a line of its own, set out certain dates and facts, leaving fair-minded readers to draw their own conclusions.

The problem of unemployment, unsolved and insoluble so long as hack politicians refused to see that the war had brought a new world into existence, was faced boldly for the first time when the present government—not to mince matters—called in a dictator to its aid. History would say, prophesied the Sheridan press, that Mr. Standish deserved well of his country inasmuch as he had recognized the existence of a problem; Lord Orpington deserved hardly less well in that he had modestly and unhesitatingly realized his own inability to solve the problem and had handed it over to the best man available. Mr. Sheridan had deserved well of his country by waiving his claim to a place in the cabinet, setting aside private obligations and personal convenience, accepting the trust as soon as it was offered and risking his reputation by engaging in a venture that had hitherto met with nothing but direst failure.

His services could be appraised better when the public had been given time to see his work as a whole, but already the public must be aware of a new spirit at home and abroad. From the day on which Mr. Sheridan consented to take a mission abroad, the figures of unemployment had been declining steadily. The curve of their decline might profitably be studied in relation to certain events on certain days: Mr. Sheridan's speech to the associated chambers of commerce, his message on leaving Tilbury, his first address to British traders abroad, the despatches which he was sending home. Enthusiasm and confidence were the dominant notes in everything he said or wrote, in every meeting he convened. If the people of England would play their part, the transition from one world to another could be accomplished safely, tranquilly, easily. The men on whom the economic revival depended were saying, as had said those on whom victory in war had depended: " *We shall win if the politicians don't let us down.*"

Of the few men who enjoyed being complimented on their perspicacity in admitting their own incompetence and on their honesty in proclaiming it, the Earl of Orpington and Selhurst was not one.

" Deserve well, do I? in unhesitatingly recognizing my own inability . . . Get hold of Max," he bade Kenneth Doyle, " and say I shall hold him personally responsible . . ."

" I can tell Sheridan that Blue Peter's getting fussed," Max conceded when his personal responsibility had been explained to him. " That's part of my job. But I've no more control over his press than you have. Blue Peter can afford to ignore these midge-bites."

" But apparently Sheridan's being taken seriously," cried Doyle, slapping impatiently at a pile of news-cuttings.

"It's his over-seas manner," said Max. "He knows the dope for colonials."

"That's all very well, but he has a following of sorts here!"

"He knows the dope for the people here."

"The attack isn't confined to his own rags now; there's a well-organized conspiracy going on. If you haven't been following it, this may interest you." He pushed a news-cutting album across the table. "I'm responsible for the way the items are arranged."

Max began to read a collection of extracts that seemed to have been made as an impartial record of the Sheridan Trade Commission. Beginning with Mr. Sheridan's acceptance of the task, it followed him port by port, interview by interview, pronouncement by pronouncement. The speeches were necessarily monotonous; and Max remembered wistfully that he had counted on six months' holiday from the statement that one part of the empire was crying for work while another cried out for workmen, with the corollary that Adelaide and London must be brought as near together as Birmingham and Liverpool.

He read with keener interest when he encountered warnings against "hack politicians". Mr. Sheridan, whose last public pronouncement on English soil had been that party-politics were dead, himself remained scrupulously aloof from party cries and passions; but, as his speeches were cabled to England, a number of papers underlined his warnings and supplied names where he had been discreetly vague. Without observing the stages by which his own mind was being coloured, Max found that he was being insidiously persuaded to regard Lord Orpington as the pantaloon, if not the villain, of the piece. Phrases about the colonial secretary's "picturesque personality" were making even a friend, with means of knowing better, fancy that, if a man was picturesque, he could be nothing else, that he must be a mountebank in politics, a hindrance and danger to the colleagues whom he obstructed and an insult to the peoples whose interests he neglected.

"They're pitchin' it pretty strong," said Max. "He must have offended the press in some way. The Sheridan papers are bein' quite fulsome, by comparison."

"If you call it fulsome to say a man's doing his best according to his lights."

Max returned to his news-cuttings and observed, with the aid of Doyle's selection and arrangement, the budding and burgeoning of a myth. To his audience abroad, Sheridan was already the one man in all England to arrest the decay of an empire; his audience at home was being taught, against his return, to see him in this light. He would come back as a man who spoke for the empire he wanted to save; the empire wanted to be saved by him. Only a parcel of "hack politicians" stood in his way. Max recalled the cartoon which Auriol had shewn him, with its Napoleonic legend: "*They tried to get rid of me too.*" A later cartoon might have portrayed Buonaparte being kept from the French people by a hack Directory.

"And all the time," said Doyle, "he has not made one specific proposal, one suggestion, one anything that could be put into a bill or an agreement. '*Imperial resources* . . . !' It's froth, like the stuff our party talks when it tells you to vote for Smith and 'the empire'; it's like the stuff these labour people talk when they promise to cure all ills by 'socialism', without even telling you what it means. If he vapours about 'an Imperial trade policy' in the House, he'll be turned inside out."

"Well, there's your chance!" said Max, standing up to leave.

"I shan't be there," Doyle answered, as they walked to the door. "I'm retiring at the end of this session."

" Retirin' ? " Max echoed. In his latest report to Sheridan he had mentioned that, when the present postmaster-general resigned, Kenneth Doyle would almost certainly be offered his place. " But you're one of our comin' men ! "

" I'm being divorced," Doyle confided abruptly. " And it's come at an unfortunate time. Standish had a talk with me last week about the Post Office ; and I thought it only fair to warn him. As I don't fancy the position of perpetual private member . . . That's by the way, though."

Max mumbled sympathetically and asked again what Lord Orpington required of him.

" I think you might drop your worthy chief a hint. Blue Peter has told the P.M. he can't carry on without the confidence of the people he's supposed to be governing."

Though the ultimatum had been delivered sooner than he expected, Max knew Lord Orpington well enough to be sure that an ultimatum would come.

" These things are rather above the head of a humble bottle-washer," he answered. " Isn't Blue Peter playing Sheridan's game ? "

" Not if it's Sheridan's game to climb into the cabinet over Peter's body. When the P.M. formed his government, certain people said they'd resign rather than serve with him. Well, it was only three or four then, but it'll be the entire party now. They'll boycott him. And I don't know that any other party wants to have him back."

" Would Blue Peter like me to say that ? " Max enquired with a grin.

" He only wants these attacks to stop. It won't do your chief any harm, though, if he remembers that Blue Peter carries some little weight with the party "

III

On thinking over the advice, Max was sufficiently impressed to consult Andrew Livingstone whether a warning should be cabled in code. And, on leaving the City, he called at Cleveland Row and invited himself to lunch with Laura Sheridan.

Three months had passed since he waved farewell at Tilbury; and the mission was by now more than half-way round the world. As he waited in the library, Max decided that Sheridan grew bigger as he became more remote. No man, indeed, was more adroit in manipulating the unfamiliar and still suspect instrument of personal publicity; but, even without his punctual despatches, even without the unremitting efforts of the editors to keep his memory green, the public would have continued to talk about him. For so many years he had monopolized so large a share of attention; he had taught his readers to look for him, as for an illusionist, in garbs so unlikely at times so unexpected; his worst enemies would regret his death in that they would no longer be able to wonder each day what " the fellow " would do next. And the departure of his mission was not unlike the sailing of a polar expedition. An echo of adventure and romance was carried back to a country that was stagnating under the rule of the least romantic and most unadventurous government in living memory.

" Wish my history wasn't so shaky ! " Max muttered, ranging in front of the wire-screened book-cases.

Fresh from his interview with Kenneth Doyle, he wanted to determine what was amiss with his present masters. He decided that they were smug. Labour might be wordy and unpractical; liberalism might be conceited and intellectually arrogant; conservatism, normally, might be anything. The conservative ministers whom Mr. Standish had collected were insufferably well-pleased with themselves. Ferrers, Carmichael, Jardine; Ferguson, Rodney, Hume; even Waterlow and Orpington: they were Little Jack Horners, they were "saps", they were "white-headed boys". No thanks to them (or to Ambrose Sheridan or any one), economic conditions were improving; and they wearied all who would listen by boasting of the pounds they had saved, the houses they were building, the employment they had created. Max lamented his sketchiness of historical equipment because he was still brooding over the Napoleonic caricature and was trying to add a further parallel. "*They tried to get rid of me too.*" . . . "*They tried to keep me from my people . . .*" What did the French say of Buonaparte after his departure for the east?

Instinctively, Max felt that they must have regarded their worthy Directors very much as he regarded Mr. Standish's smug team. They had all the virtues, not excluding dulness; and such was the contrariety of human nature that the very people who had been praying for security, tranquillity, sanity and soundness were the first to be dissatisfied when their prayers were answered. Hardly had the shadow of foreign conquest been removed before the gunmen of the club smoking-rooms were forming armies of "English *fascisti*" and the gunmen of labour executives proclaiming that every strike was part of a social war which must be "fought to a finish." Like the French in the last years of the eighteenth century, they were tingling and restless from the memory of a soul-searching conflict; in the morning-hour of life they had ridden abroad with adventure on their pillion and had shivered a lance with death. Not for them the punctual monotony of peace, if a stranger came to them telling of risk and glory: a Napoleon, guaranteeing them their revolution and hinting at a fabulous empire; a Sheridan, leading them to order through a wasted world of anarchy and ruin.

And Kenneth Doyle said with resentful incredulity that "the fellow" had "a following of sorts" in England. Though secretly ashamed of his weakness, Max had to admit that his cheapjack chief in some way stimulated his imagination.

"I just looked in for a gossip," he explained, when Laura came down. "Lord Orpington's very savage because he never gets a good press nowadays. He thinks Mr. Sheridan is responsible and talks of resigning if he can't get fair play. We needn't bother our heads about that, but I'm told that, if he resigns, he'll go bald-headed for your husband, pullin' every string in his power to keep him from ever bein' taken into a government. Interestin'. I've filed it all for reference in my public-opinion-day-by-day, but I wanted to hear your views. Peter Orpington carries a tremendous lot of weight with the cabinet and the sort of Derby-Day crowd; Mr. Sheridan carries a tremendous lot of weight with all sorts and conditions. If it came to a tug-of-war . . ."

Laura took a chair with its back to the light and motioned Max into another.

"It rather depends what they were fighting about," she answered.

"I suppose he'll make a report that he knows Orpington won't accept: imperial council, standin' committee of imperial defence and commerce . . ."

Laura's face lighted up with a smile of quietly triumphant confidence:

"Then I believe he'd win. I believe he can do anything he wants. Perhaps that's because he always *has* got his way. I believe he stands higher than he ever did before. As I told you the other day, unless he throws everything away . . ."

"He knows too much."

Laura hesitated and turned her head to the window. As her face met the light, Max fancied that she was looking pinched and worried

" There can be so many kinds of slip 'twixt the cup and the lip," she sighed. " Have you heard from him lately, Max ? "

" Not since last I saw you. Have you ? "

" He doesn't write to me." As soon as the confession was spoken, Laura tried to turn the edge of its meaning. " It's such a weariness, when you're abroad, if you have to write the same thing again and again to different people. We agreed that he should keep a journal and send it to you to have copied and distributed. . . . Well, I suppose they're beginning to get our letters now. He never said quite definitely what day he would be back ? "

" It wasn't possible. He's to let me know as soon as he comes within wireless-range of England."

" And that won't be for nearly three months yet. . . . Well, what news have you for me ? As you know, I go out very little . . ."

Max considered for a moment and then poured out all the gossip that he had been able to collect, beginning with Kenneth Doyle's impending divorce. He described a successful meeting at Ascot and a less successful one at Windsor. He announced his plans for the late summer and outlined the holiday he purposed to take before Mr. Sheridan returned.

" You lead a very happy life," Laura commented as he paused.

" Not much to complain of. I should like to feel a bit more settled. This job was never intended to be more than a makeshift."

" Yes, you should be independent," she agreed.

" That's easier said than done. If you've no money of your own, you're bound to take it from some one . . ."

" It makes a difference who you take it from. I don't think any one could take money from my husband and remain independent. Except Mr. Livingstone. . . .

Ambrose is a very masterful man, he likes power; and I think he only cares about money for the power it gives him. My brother Tony . . . I'm very fond of him, but you mustn't sell yourself as Tony's done. Or, let me say, as *I've* done. It's a terrible thing to let any one become indispensable to you."

" But you do that if you're fond of people, without any question of money."

" Ah, yes. . . . But when you depend on people for money . . . I can never meet Ambrose on an equality, one human being meeting another, because I haven't a penny apart from what he gives me. This is very sordid, though! What other news have you?"

" I don't think I've any. Things came to a standstill on the day Mr. Sheridan sailed. They'll begin to move again on the day he lands, but in the meantime I feel this is an *entr'acte.* '*Six months elapse.*' "

" The papers are beginning to prepare for his return already. That will be the big sensation of the autumn. You see, his report *must* be revolutionary, or people will say he's failed. They'll say the boom in trade is independent of him. He can't allow that. '*Act Two. Six months have elapsed. The* Koh-i-nor *is being tugged into Southampton.*" . . ." she improvised with a smile.

IV

LESS than a week passed before Max was given cause to admire once again Laura Sheridan's political sense or her knowledge of the tactics to expect of her husband.

From Brisbane, where the mission was making its last halt on Australian soil, came reports of the speeches in which Mr. Sheridan summarized his conclusions on the first half of his voyage. A second instalment was promised rom New Zealand; his utterances in Canada would be cabled to England day by day; and, while it would be obviously improper for him to broadcast his report before submitting it to the prime minister, there could be no objection to his epitomizing the recommendations which he had in fact already made publicly to one audience after another.

No common policy, declared Sheridan, could be achieved in questions of imperial trade or communication until machinery had been erected. Imperial conferences which presented recommendations to one government and saw them rejected by the next were a waste of time for all who attended them ; high commissioners without plenary powers were a waste of the money paid for their maintenance. Before anything else, the dominions and colonies must outgrow their distrust of their own representatives and of each other ; and, if nothing would overcome their suspicion that Downing Street was hypnotizing their representatives when in fact their representatives were shedding a little of their native parochialism, the dominions and colonies should send ambassadors to London and there control them by cable. Without some kind of standing conference, however, it was idle to expect a common policy and common action.

With a wry smile, Max recollected Mrs. Sheridan's prediction that her husband's recommendations would be revolutionary.

" Blue Peter won't care for this," he prophesied.

The recommendations following were likely to be even less palatable, not only to Lord Orpington but to three of his colleagues. Straying unabashed outside his terms of reference, Sheridan developed his scheme for a standing conference. Once the machinery had been erected, its operations, he urged, should not be confined to questions of trade and communications. At present there was no adequate opportunity for common deliberation of problems of foreign policy and defence. Downing Street called the tune and then waited anxiously to see who would join in the dance or help to pay the piper. In the Chanak affair, the cabinet was within twenty-four hours of war without knowing what support it could expect from the dominions. At no time had the Foreign Office any assurance that its treaties would be ratified by one or any of the dominions. When the standing conference was erected, its duties must include the preparation of a foreign policy by which all would be bound and of naval and military agreements to which all would subscribe.

Max whistled to himself in fearful joy at the emotions which this unauthorized recommendation was likely to arouse. Sir John Ferrers, then, was to be " assisted " at the Foreign Office by a council of dominion ambassadors. When the council had finished with him, it would adjourn to the Admiralty or War Office, there to help Mr. Rodney or Mr. Carmichael in framing such plans of campaign as they could advise their governments to support.

" If I didn't know him," said Max, " I should say he was ridin' for a fall."

From the Brisbane speech he turned to the criticism of it in the English press. With hardly an exception, the London papers printed a digest and accompanied it by a leading-article to explain that it would be unsatisfactory to comment on what at best was an interim report. With hardly an exception they referred courteously to Mr. Sheridan's unique experience and fine public spirit in undertaking the mission. Then half fell silent.

The other half, made up almost equally of his own and of independent journals, had evidently decided to squeeze the last drop of " news-value " out of his mission and himself. They pandered to the presumed English passion for a strong man ; they catered liberally for the proved English love of personal details ; and they set themselves to shew that newspaper interest, once set in motion, increased in size and momentum, like a rolling snow-ball, without extraneous help. The first photographs, sent back from India, were now supplemented by those which had been posted ahead while the mission was pausing in Australia. Day by day Mr. Sheridan was exhibited in a Government House group, leaning out of a train or ascending a gangway. His speeches were enlivened by pictures of the buildings in which he made them. And an insidious atmosphere of excitement was created as the *Koh-i-nor* steamed slowly westward and the newspaper-reading public was reminded that Mr. Sheridan was on his way home. It was doubtful, Max thought, whether one man in ten thousand could define why he was excited or what he expected Sheridan to do, but a prize-fighter or cinematograph-actress could not have been tracked more closely nor awaited more eagerly. The buoyancy, which the Otways had remarked on their return to London in the spring, seemed to be kept alive by a blind faith that the good times would be made even better when Mr. Sheridan came back.

His return, as Laura had predicted, would be the big "sensation" of the autumn.

"You can't explain it," said Lord Otway, as he left the House of Lords one afternoon with the colonial secretary. "Some people strike the popular imagination, others don't. In our own time Churchill and George and K. and Jacky Fisher; before them, Randolph and Jo. The public has a liking for them even when it's opposed to them. For some reason, the mob has always believed in Sheridan."

"The mob—or a big section of it—continued to believe in Bottomley even after he'd been sent to prison," Lord Orpington rejoined. "Perhaps if he'd been taken into a government . . ."

"Does Standish think of taking Sheridan in?"

Lord Orpington swung his stick impatiently:

"You never know what Standish *does* think! He's an artful old fox and he's putting some of us in a very tight corner. To be frank with you, when Sheridan was sent out, I expected him to fail."

" He hasn't failed, he hasn't succeeded. Conditions have improved, certainly; but, though I think he's entitled to the credit for that, he can't *claim* it. There's no proof."

" I'm afraid he'll manufacture it. This boom . . . It's come from nothing! Nothing but vague expectation. Every one looks to see him brandishing an elixir. If he doesn't? God knows, *he* doesn't want a slump, but I doubt if he could prevent it. And, if he makes his tomfool recommendations, if he puts a pistol to our heads, what are we going to do? Standish wants to keep the government together and he's afraid of leaving Sheridan to attack him from outside. He's afraid, too, of a split, if he brings him in. Johnnie Ferrers still says he'll call a strike if any non-union men are employed."

Lord Otway grimaced at the metaphor. Though the foreign secretary was a merciless opponent of trade-unionism in industry, he aspired to make of his party the strictest close corporation.

" I think he's mistaken; and so I told Standish three months ago. Nobody, I said, should be allowed to lay any one else under a ban of perpetual excommunication. If Ferrers would resign rather than serve with Sheridan, the P.M. had better accept his resignation."

" It's not Ferrers alone."

Lord Otway debated with himself how much it was prudent to tell Lord Orpington in his present mood of resentment. For three months, ever since the prime minister asked who could be trusted to join the cabinet if Ferrers and his friends left, a " second eleven " had been forming under Lord Otway's captaincy.

" I doubt if Carmichael and the others would resign in sympathy," he answered. " I doubt, indeed, whether Ferrers himself would do more than threaten. The position has changed a bit since the original league-and-covenant was formed against Sheridan. Some of us are prepared to judge a man by his works . . ."

"But *you* wouldn't serve with a man who spends all his time stabbing his colleagues in the back?"

Put in such a form, the question was embarrassing.

"He's not stabbing his *colleagues*," Lord Otway distinguished: "he's not in the cabinet as yet. I think he ought to be. I think it's time this boycott ceased. The P.M. asked whether I'd fill a place if necessary; and I promised my support and the support of any one who pays me the compliment of listening to my advice."

V

LORD ORPINGTON walked for some moments in silence; then he laughed ruefully:

"I wondered why he's seemed so much more sure of himself lately. He can tell Ferrers now, thanks to you, to resign and be damned."

"I hope you don't feel . . " Lord Otway began.

"It doesn't affect me. I've shot my bolt. I've told the P.M. that I can't continue to serve while I'm being sniped on every hand by Sheridan's sharp-shooters. If he can get an undertaking that this will stop, I'm ready to continue. Otherwise I go back to a life that amuses me very much more than sitting in a stuffy cabinet, working in a mouldy office . . ."

"If you resign, you're leaving Sheridan a clear field. I wonder if that's desirable."

"You don't seem to love him any more than I do!" laughed Lord Orpington.

"I don't. I admire his abilities, I recognize his force, but I don't know where I am with him. We don't employ the same standards, we don't use the same language. What would you have thought, Peter, ten years ago, if I'd made love to one of your girls?"

They had reached the steps of Nugent's Club; and Lord Orpington, feeling that his advice was being sought, checked and led the way to a couple of arm-chairs in the bow-window looking on St. James' Street.

"I can't imagine it, somehow." To add that he could not imagine his daughters' allowing a married man twice their age to make love to them would have seemed a reflection on Auriol. "In fairness to Sheridan, he could quote precedents among people who ought to know better Matheson. Avonmouth."

Lord Otway nodded and looked cautiously round the morning-room. If the world had not become more lax since the war, it had certainly become more shameless. What would Mr. Balfour or Lord Salisbury have thought, in old days, of a secretary of state who had been observed helplessly drunk in three continents? What would the old Duchess of Devonshire or Lady Portroyal have said to some of the men and women who were still received? A Portroyal grand-daughter was now to be seen everywhere in the company of Lord Larchester, challenging Lady Larchester—it was said—to divorce her husband. Sir Herbert Worplesden and the Ryecroft child were hardly less notorious than Lord Preston and Miss Hayes. These girls cared as little about a reputation for virtue as about virtue itself. Ostracism had no terrors for those who had ostracized themselves in advance; and the Cosmopolitan Club would receive them when every private door was closed in their faces. Lord Otway was old enough to have seen society in London changing out of recognition. He had watched the impoverished old aristocracy being driven back by a Jewish invasion and an American invasion; he had seen the lawyers and manufacturers and merchants forcing their way to the front; and he had yielded precedence to the owners of breweries and ships and newspapers. Each new strain had brought with it a change of manners: society now was less temperate and less conscientious, more irresponsible and more irreverent than in his Victorian youth It had not, however, been more vicious until the final revolution of the war

" I don't know, I'm sure . . ." he muttered helplessly.

Worplesden was a minister. Preston was a power in the north of England. Larchester bore an historic title. All three of them had wives and grown-up families. Sometimes their daughters were the friends of their fathers' mistresses ; sometimes they refused to meet them.

" If we set the example . . ." sighed Lord Orpington. Detesting puritanism, he still held that it was bad form for a man to parade his private affairs in public ; and his instinct for caste taught him that the men of his order had no business to corrupt the women of their order. " We've let in such an odd lot lately . . ."

Since Balfour's day the leaders of the party had all been drawn from the middle class. Bonar Law, Baldwin, Standish : all merchants or manufacturers. So with their lieutenants. Carson, Birkenhead, Rodney and Horne were lawyers. Chamberlain and Carmichael were sons of manufacturers. And it was not even the English middle class, which one did at least know. Public life in England was coming to be controlled more and more by Canadians, like Beaverbrook, and South Africans, like Stavely, who bought papers, supported this faction or that, shoved their oars in generally. And the Jews, as ever, had halted a caravan in their midst.

" Sheridan will be home in the autumn," said Lord Otway. " *I* don't know what to say. He might well feel I was being unreasonable in forbidding an innocent friendship between him and Auriol, when much more serious things are going on all round you. The fact is, I don't believe in these innocent friendships between a man of his age and a girl of hers ! "

"But you can trust Auriol!"

"She won't run away with him, but if he tells her he's a free man . . ."

Lord Otway broke off and stared miserably out of the window. These things lay without his ken. To marry a man after such a divorce was morally no better than to run away with him. Technicalities were being observed, appearances kept up, but the guilt of the principals was not diminished by a subterfuge.

"She'll be in the fashion," was the only comfort Lord Orpington could offer.

"I don't profess to like divorce, though I try not to be narrow-minded," Lord Otway declared. "I wouldn't necessarily object to my daughter's marrying a man who'd had one wife already, but when she *drives* him into the divorce court. . . . And that's what Auriol would be doing, though she doesn't see it. Sheridan would never have contemplated a divorce if he hadn't wanted to marry her."

"Have they made up their minds to it?"

"Oh, God knows! They're thinking it over. I suppose they'll decide as soon as he comes back. She's upset by his glamour, poor child! I can understand it. He has great personality, he has done big things. And when she sees a man like that on his knees to her . . . There've been times when I've hoped this mission would be a failure, to shake her faith in him; but I believe it would have the opposite effect, I believe she'd feel she must stand shoulder to shoulder with him."

"You'd better pray for it to be a success," Lord Orpington recommended. "If Sheridan's given a seat in the cabinet, there can't be any question of a divorce. That's one of the few things Standish is firm about. Only fear, I suppose: he's afraid of the church party and the nonconformists; but he won't have a scandal. I wanted him to give Carden's job to my cousin, young

Kenneth Doyle, but Standish refused point-blank. He'd heard rumours, he said." . . .

Lord Otway's thoughts went back to the day when he urged the prime minister to send Sheridan abroad. Clearly enough, on that occasion, he had seen that a great failure or a great success would suit him equally well: the first by pricking a bubble, the second by inflating it to such size that it had to be preserved at all costs. There was always the chance, however, that the mission would lie mid-way between success and failure. Sheridan might produce his report, he might lay claim to have solved every problem set him and a few more added gratuitously; but, until effect had been given to his recommendations, he remained the author of an untried, paper plan.

"I wish I knew whether Standish has the courage to force Sheridan in over the heads of Ferrers and Co.," said Lord Otway.

"They won't resign if they dream their resignations will be accepted. It's Standish himself who's the difficulty: he can't make up his mind whether it's worse to be attacked by Sheridan from outside or devoured by him from within."

"Sheridan won't be content with a letter of thanks," Lord Otway predicted. "He expects office; and he'll let fly, if he doesn't get it. Can't you persuade Standish that he's doomed if he doesn't take Sheridan in?"

"Though you think he's doomed if he does?"

"I'm afraid I don't care what happens to Standish or the government or the country if only I can get Auriol out of this entanglement."

CHAPTER V

The Curtain Rises

" . . . At last
O' the long degraded and insulting day,
Sudden the clock told it was judgment-time.
Then he addressed himself to speak indeed
To the fools, not knaves: they saw him walk straight down
Each step of the eminence, as he first engaged,
And stand at last o' the level,—all he swore.
'People, and not the people's varletry,
'This is the task you set myself and these!
'Thus I performed my part of it, and thus
'They thwarted me throughout, here, here, and here:
'Study each instance! yours the loss, not mine.
'What they intend now is demonstrable
'As plainly: here's such man, and here's such mode
'Of making you some other than the thing
'You, wisely or unwisely, choose to be,
'And only set him up to keep you so.
'Do you approve this? Yours the loss, not mine.
'Do you condemn it? There's a remedy.
'Take me . . .'"

ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau,*
Saviour of Society.

I

THE *Koh-i-nor* reached Vancouver in the height of the Canadian summer and proceeded through the Panama Canal and up to Halifax while Ambrose Sheridan conducted his mission across the continent. From Halifax he brought it south to Bermuda and the West Indies. In the first days of autumn a cable from Barbados announced that they were sailing for home. And the newspaper-public, long artificially stimulated to watch for their return, learned with excitement that they would land in England no more than twelve days later

The cable, despatched from Bridgetown, was addressed to Max, with the usual instruction to make its contents known to all concerned. After communicating with the press, he telephoned to Kenneth Doyle, visited Andrew Livingstone in the City, left a message for Tony Rushforth and called on Laura Sheridan. For the first time in his experience she was unable to see him ; and he gave the half-hour which he had destined for her to a walk across the park on the chance of finding the Otways at home.

Though he pretended to ridicule the attitude of tip-toe expectancy into which Sheridan had forced his public, Max realized that, for different and more definite reasons, he was awaiting the *Koh-i-nor* as eagerly as any one How well or ill he had laboured as "director of intelligence" he must leave Sheridan to say, but he was not prepared to continue in a position that held no prospects, no responsibility, little money and less work. During the last six months, Max had attended every important race-meeting in the south of England, he had spent every week-end in some pleasant party, he had danced throughout the London season, he had gambled of an afternoon at Yates' and he had always been at hand when Auriol wanted to be taken out to dinner or a play. It had been enjoyable enough, but it was expensive, it was unprofitable and it was demoralizing. To his fury, Max found that he was putting on weight ; more than one candid friend told him that he was looking dissipated ; and those who did not wait to consider the terms of his engagement with Sheridan imagined that he was out of work and wondered whether anybody would ever find him fit for anything.

II

THIS, however, did not matter until Auriol began to treat him as a loafer

"If I were you, I should have a good rest to get up strength," she recommended when he told her of the *Koh-i-nor's* movements. "If you suddenly begin to work, you'll strain something inside you."

"Not my fault there hasn't been enough to do," Max answered. "I bin obeyin' orders."

"Oh, I know! The order to stand easy is one you'd never disobey. All the same, if you'd had any backbone, Max, you wouldn't have been *content* to vegetate. You'd have struck out a line for yourself."

"And left Uncle Sheridan in the lurch?" As Auriol's nerves were obviously fretted, he refrained from reminding her that he had "vegetated" (or stuck to his post, however one liked to regard it) at her orders. "Are you goin' to invite me to lunch with you?"

"Yes, if you like. Bobbie Selhurst and Aylwin are coming. And a few more. Did Mr. Sheridan say anything about his work?"

Max hesitated before answering. He would have been better pleased if no members of Lord Orpington's family had been invited for that day. In spite of reiterated explanations that he neither controlled nor inspired the Sheridan press, they persisted in holding him vaguely responsible for the attacks on their father. And with every mile that Sheridan drew nearer to England the attacks became more malevolent. While his own speeches and despatches remained scrupulously courteous, an insidious propaganda could be deduced from the criticism of the colonial press and from the extracts which the Sheridan press was punctual to publish. The dominion governments had been told that they could hope for nothing so long as Lord Orpington remained at the Colonial Office; their papers repeated, as a discovery of their own, what Sheridan had told them; and the Sheridan press reprinted, as the unanimous and unbiassed opinion of the dominions governments and press, what

Sheridan had persuaded them to regard as their own discovery.

Perhaps it was imagination, but Max fancied that, when the Orpingtons met him nowadays, their smiles became fixed and their eyes bright with hostility.

" Did Mr. Sheridan say anything about his work ? " Auriol repeated. " Is he pleased with it ? "

" It wouldn't be like him if he wasn't. More to the point to know whether the cabinet's pleased with *him*. I know one member who's not : Blue Peter. He's very savage . . ."

He broke off as the door opened to admit " Blue Peter's " youngest daughter and son. They were followed by Lady Otway and Colin, who were followed in turn by Tony Rushforth : a newcomer to Manchester Square and one who could not wholly conceal his satisfaction at being there.

" I thought you'd be interested to know that Mr. Sheridan sailed from Barbados yesterday," Tony began impressively to the room at large.

Then he caught sight of Max, to whom he owed this tit-bit of news, and his face fell.

" It's in the evenin' papers," said Max, who would have objected less to Tony's method of securing invitations if he had given better value for the food he consumed. " I broadcast the glad tidin's before ringin' you up."

" I heard about it from father," said Lady Aylwin.

" Did he tell you he'd fused the wire with sheer heat of profanity when he heard ? " asked Max.

" Well, hang it all . . ." Selhurst began, then stopped as he realized that he was about to attack Sheridan in the hearing of Sheridan's brother-in-law. " We all wish he'd give it up."

" He would have," Lady Aylwin added, turning on Tony the hard smile and brightly hostile eyes which she normally reserved for Max, " but he was afraid of splitting the cabinet. I don't suppose, though, that weighs with you. Another labour government . . ."

"You mustn't hold *me* responsible," Tony protested. "I act as trustee for my brother-in-law, but that's all. I only mentioned his name because Lady Otway made me promise to tell her when I had any news of him."

If this was the reason for Tony's presence in the house, Max wondered why the Otways had not turned to a handier source of information.

"I always tell you the news whenever there is any," he murmured to Auriol.

"I know. *I* didn't ask Mr. Rushforth," she returned. "I detest him. He hasn't the loyalty . . . Oh, Heavens, they've started!"

Listening by turn to three different conversations, Max felt that his vanity-racked chief would have been gratified to know how much interest his return was exciting. Colin, with one eye on Tony, was asking Aylwin in an undertone if her father meant to let "the fellow" drive him out of politics. Selhurst was enquiring Lady Otway's opinion of the last despatch; and Tony, seeking an unbiassed tribunal, was pressing Lord Otway to tell him whether the cabinet was to be reconstructed and whether a place would be found in it for Sheridan. Lord Otway, abandoning for once his cautious habit of not committing himself, replied that Sheridan, of all men, deserved a place and that those who had resisted him before could not be allowed to stand in his way any longer.

The tone or the sentiment caused Auriol to look up in surprise.

"A new line for you!" she mocked her father. "I thought you said you could never trust him."

"My dear! Spare Mr. Rushforth's feelings," begged Lady Otway.

"Mr. Rushforth doesn't trust him either," said Auriol. "Do you?" she demanded point-blank.

With the eyes of every one upon him, Tony tried to reconcile his early unguarded confidences with a show of loyalty.

"I may have said he didn't *inspire* trust," he answered mildly. "In others, I meant. He's a business man; and he likes to make the best bargain always. I daresay he examines what he puts into a contract more carefully than the other man; then he's called hard if he stands out for his bond. But he'd never default. If he promised to do a thing . . ."

"Would you trust him if he didn't put the promise in writing?" Auriol interrupted. Then, without waiting for an answer, she continued: "I *would*. But, you see, I believe in him. So do you, Max. I can never understand how any one could work for him *without* believing in him, but I know Geoffrey Mallock doesn't. I know you don't, Mr. Rushforth . . ."

"My dear, I don't think you're being at all fair to poor Mr. Rushforth," interposed Lady Otway. "Has luncheon been announced? Oh, well, then . . ."

As they went downstairs, Max looked intently at Auriol's flushed face, puzzled to discover why, of a sudden, she was become so bellicose. Aylwin Selhurst had perhaps made the atmosphere electric by her manner to Tony; but her antagonism was veiled, while Auriol had been openly rude. Remembering her confession earlier in the summer that they had all got on one another's nerves, Max decided that she was suffering from a surfeit of family life; and, as they took their places, he asked how soon she could spare a night to dine and go to a theatre with him.

"You think I need rescuing?" Auriol asked, with her eyes on Colin and Selhurst, who were still arguing in the doorway.

"I was thinkin' it would be fun for me," said Max. "Last days of the holidays, you know."

The gracious tone and unpolished phrasing offered a noticeable contrast to Auriol's far more polished phrasing and far less gracious tone.

"Do you *ever* think of *anything* except enjoying yourself ? " she asked.

"Sometimes." He would have liked to add that he thought sometimes how amazingly ill-bred a young woman could be and how amazingly difficult it was for a fellow not to sink to her level. He checked, partly for fear of sinking and partly from a troubled sense that sweet, plucky little Auriol must be upset to be lashing out like this. "Sometimes," he repeated. "I decoded a cable this mornin'. I'm goin' to write some letters this afternoon. All I meant to say was that, if you *could* spare a night before Uncle Ambrose comes back . . ."

"Will you go on working for him ? " Auriol interrupted

"Until he's settled down. I know you think I'm frightfully slack, but I don't feel justified in leavin' a feller, who's been uncommon good to me, just when I'm beginnin' to be of some use to him. I don't say I do much . . ."

Auriol's face suddenly cleared ; and she patted Max's hand gratefully :

"But *I* say that's the first whisper of loyalty I've heard for a million years. Thank you, Max ! Listen to these jackals ! Shall I set a little trap for them ? Mr. Rushforth ! *Mr. Rushforth !* You go about everywhere. What do people say about Mr. Sheridan *now ?* I don't mean the mob ; but *intelligent* people. In clubs. Houses where you stay."

III

So far as Max could see, no one observed that a trap was being set. Colin was heard to murmur that, if he might be regarded as intelligent, he could very soon answer the question. Selhurst smiled and waited his turn.

Lord Otway, with a long, white hand cupping a pink ear, leaned forward, with a comfortable assurance that nothing would be said to hurt any one's feelings.

Tony frowned pensively and looked round the table to determine where the majority lay. To Max, who was prejudiced and knew that he was prejudiced, it seemed that in the moment of silence Mr. Sheridan's trustee was saying: "*Selhurst and Lady Aylwin loathe him. Otway, Lady Otway and the boy won't like me the better for defending him. The girl doesn't count. And, though Max Hendry may put up a formal protest, he won't repeat what I've said.*" . . . So fortified, he assembled and embellished the comments that he had collected from a society that disliked Ambrose Sheridan more than it admired him and feared even more than it disliked. To the speaker's evident surprise, Max made no protest. There was, indeed, no opportunity when every moment of silence was claimed by Lady Aylwin or Selhurst. In time Colin joined in the hunt; Lord Otway appeared to forget that he had ever wished to see Sheridan rewarded and advanced; and even Lady Otway murmured her distaste for people who persisted in cementing empires and reforming society and saving souls. Only Auriol, who had laid the drag, refused to ride it.

"Very interestin' show-down," Max muttered.

A single voice would have been drowned; and he preferred to hear something that was usually kept from him when people remembered he was Sheridan's secretary. How they hated the man! How they distrusted him! The riches he had amassed and the power he had won might have been forgiven him if he had employed them on their behalf, but he had flirted and passed on.

"All this reminds me rather of what people said about Lloyd-George," Max whispered to Auriol. "At one moment he was a dirty little Welsh attorney, then he was the man who won the war, then he became a dirty little

Welsh attorney again. I could never see it, myself. You may like him or not, as you please, but he's always run absolutely true to form. So has Sheridan. These good souls say he's a fine horse, when they've backed him, and a rogue, when they haven't."

Auriol shook her head despairingly:

"And these are the people who talk about 'uneducated mobs'! Listen to daddy! And six months ago he was saying, poor darling, that the City at least seemed to believe in Mr. Sheridan. Briskness! Optimism! And now! It's always the same! When I was in my cradle, they were calling Mr. Asquith a traitor; then he was the only man who could have brought England into the war, then he was a traitor again. Winston and the mobilization. Mr. McKenna and the dreadnoughts. Our people abused them like pickpockets; then they said they'd saved the country; then they abused them like pickpockets again. We *are* the stupid party."

"I own I think it's silly," said Max.

"I think it's vile," said Auriol between her teeth.

The word carried; and Lord Otway stopped the hunt by suggesting that perhaps they ought not to criticize a man who was not present to defend himself.

"Though I will say this for Sheridan," he added, "he never minds home-truths. I remember once, when he was lunching here, we all began to cross-question him. . . You were the worst on that occasion, my dear," he reminded Lady Otway.

Auriol's lips parted; and, with an instinctive effort to save her from saying something which she might regret afterwards, Max looked at his watch and stood up.

"You comin' my way?" he asked Tony. "Good-bye, Auriol. If you find you *have* a free night . . ."

His movement broke up the party; and, when he reached the Square, he found that the young Selhursts had joined him. Within the house, an ominous calm descended on the dining-room; and Lord Otway enquired vaguely what every one was going to do that afternoon

"I've letters to write," Auriol announced with a white face.

"You can't come out with me?" asked Lady Otway

"Oh, if you like! You want to have a talk? The sooner we get it over the better. Shall we begin now, or would you like to wait for a full family council?"

"A family council?" Lady Otway echoed. "I want to see those tiresome people about the lamp-shades."

"Won't that wait? If you've nothing to say to me, I've a lot to say to you all. And, first of all, I *can't* congratulate you on your tactics!"

"Tactics?" murmured Colin.

Auriol drew herself to her full height and clenched her fists. If any one else repeated her words with a disingenuous air of surprise, she would explode prematurely. It was safer to say nothing that could be repeated. It was safer to say nothing at all, ever.

"It will do you much more good to have a little fresh air," said Lady Otway.

"All right! The atmosphere in here is certainly rather foul."

"I don't know that 'foul' . . ." her mother began in gentle protest.

"I thought it just described this party! Poison-gas. I *did* enjoy listening to you all. The moment you got your chance! I gave it you! I lured you on to say, just for once in a while, what you really did think. And now I know."

"You can't expect Selhurst or Aylwin to be very cordial," said Lady Otway. "They *do* feel that Mr. Sheridan has been hitting their father below the belt"

"And Mr. Rushforth?" enquired Auriol.

"He'd be hardly human if he didn't feel sore at the way his sister has been treated for so many years," said Lord Otway.

"How forgiving of him to take a salary from such a monster! Colin, I suppose . . "

"I said what most people would say, Auriol," her brother answered patiently. "You live in a world of your own, you make a god of this fellow, you won't listen to what anybody tells you. I say he's a hopeless wrong 'un."

All three of them waited for an outburst; but Auriol would only laugh:

"You're always saying so, Colin dear! At least, whenever you get the chance, whenever he can't defend himself. As an exhibition of chivalry, loyalty . . ."

"How sick I am of that word!" Colin muttered. "You think it's shocking for Geoffrey Mallock to find fault with your god; it doesn't strike you as at all sinister that the people who know him best, the people who live with him and work with him are the very first to see he's a wrong 'un. They can't help it. He can't deceive *them*."

"That's dreadful for him, poor man," Auriol mocked. "Will you continue to know me if I marry him?"

"I'm going for a walk," Colin announced abruptly.

Auriol waited for the front door to close and then went to her own room. Had she troubled to turn her head, she would have caught her father signalling: "Go with her and see what you can do"; had she demeaned herself to listen, she must have heard her mother saying: "I can't do anything with her in her present mood. We ought never to have discussed the subject. We're making her think she's his one friend. If he says 'You too?' she'll follow him blindfold for very shame. After all her fine speeches, she can't do anything else."

"It's true!" Auriol whispered.

She would never be shamed into anything, she would never be afraid to say when she was wrong: that was not true It was true, though, that she was the one friend

Ambrose Sheridan could trust. Even Max said the fellow was a mixture. And Ambrose knew she was the one friend he could trust. They had not communicated for six months; they were supposed to be thinking things over and deciding whether they were "still of the same mind." Six months or six years: it made no difference; though the universe abandoned him, he should never have cause to say: "*You too, Auriol?*"

IV

In a fortnight they would be meeting; in less than a fortnight she would hear something from him.

He had promised to get some message through to her as soon as he came within wireless-range. Perhaps he would say: "*The world's too strong for me. If I'm to do any good, I must have the world on my side.*" Well, she would help him as best she could; it was he who talked of inspiration and urged her to marry him; she did not care whether she married him or not, so long as she could help him.

Perhaps he would say: "*These six months have made no difference. Did you ever think they could?*" Whichever it was, she would have her answer in less than a fortnight; in less than a fortnight she would be released from uncertainty, from mystery-making and from the spiritual isolation of the last six months. Ever since the storm that broke before he sailed, she had been a stranger to her family; she had talked to her friends across an unmeasured abyss; she had been alone even when she was with Max or Bobbie Selhurst, the most solitary human being in the world except Ambrose himself.

He, as she divined without being told, was always alone. Success had raised him above the generality of his fellows; and, on the narrow peak which he shared with men as successful as himself, he remained apart. The others were ever on the look-out for a chance to push any rival down; and he had united the others against him because he refused to sell them his soul.

"*The people who live with him and work with him are the very first to see he's a wrong 'un.*" . . .

Auriol found great difficulty in remaining patient with Colin, when he talked like that, or with her father, when he said: "*I should like to see him in the cabinet, but it's certainly unfortunate that people seem to distrust him so much.*" Of course they distrusted him! Had he not spoken and voted during half a dozen years in a way that made the label-mongers acclaim or dismiss him in turn as liberal, labour, conservative? To their mean, dark minds did he not stand revealed as a man who would turn his coat and betray his party for preferment? When he disclaimed the obsession of party, was he not advertising the obsession of self? None of them believed him, none of them listened when he said: "*I voted labour because I was profoundly dissatisfied with the present state of society and saw no hope of improvement from liberals or conservatives. I have since voted against labour because labour has disappointed me and I am as much dissatisfied as ever with the present state of society.*" To Colin, you were a traitor to your class if you paid super-tax and failed to vote conservative; you were a traitor to your party if you failed in an allegiance which you had never sworn; and you were a traitor to your country if you put the interests of the state before the interests of a party.

And so Ambrose Sheridan was always alone, always suspect.

Auriol tried to picture him on the *Koh-i-nor*, facing eastward for the last four thousand miles of his voyage. He was alone, though every cabin was filled; alone, though he was surrounded by an army of colleagues. In England he was alone when he sat on a crowded bench at Westminster, alone when he dictated orders to his staff, alone when he came home to a wife who had somehow dropped out of his life. No one enjoyed his confidence, no one shared his troubles. No one met him as an equal, to advise or chide or banter him. And sometimes, he had told her, this isolation frightened him: the surrounding coldness and silence made him wonder if the rest of the world was dead; and sometimes he wondered whether he was going mad.

Auriol walked to her writing-table and studied her calendar. He would be within wireless-range of England several days before the end of the fortnight. Their common loneliness would be ended by his message, but, before he could send it, she wanted to hail him across that infinite expanse of water and to let him know that she was waiting for him.

"If you want me . . ." she whispered. "Still of the same mind? Yes! You'll never have to say '*You too, Auriol?*' You need never feel lonely again . . ."

She began to write him a letter, then stopped with a puzzled sense that she had said all she had to say. It was a sentimental fancy, doubtless, but her message seemed to be already on its way to him. He would receive it, had received it already and knew that she was pledged. Five o'clock in London: what time would it be in Bridgetown or in the position, twenty-four hours out from Bridgetown, where the *Koh-i-nor* was now? Where was Ambrose? What was he doing? How did he look?

She pictured him in a duck suit and a sun-helmet, towering over every one else. He was pacing the deck by himself, with his head thrust forward and his hands locked behind his back. Every one was watching him, every one was trying to get into conversation with him. And, listening to the whisper of her message, he was deaf and blind to them all. . . .

At the sound of gentle tapping, Auriol roused from her reverie. Five o'clock in London. Tea had been taken into the drawing-room; and the butler was asking whether she would have hers there or in her own room.

"Oh, there," she answered.

An hour before, it would have seemed impossible for her to meet the family again, but in some way that she could not define the family had ceased to matter.

V

"*I used to think,*" Auriol wrote in her diary that night, "*I was cut out for a parliamentary career. I've discovered I'm not. I'm not cut out for anything where there's suspense. For the last six months I've been stretched on a rack; and this evening, for the first time, I can think calmly, see clearly and behave like a rational being. The suspense is over. I've made up my mind. As regards the family, I've said to myself what I shall probably have to say later to them (daddy's favourite phrase!): 'We must agree to differ.' We can't argue; and I for one am not going to fight. Assuming that A. is still of the same mind, I shall tell him I haven't changed and that I'm ready for us to be shot at together, even though I think it's rather childish for any one to shoot at us. If only his wife had divorced him ten years ago, what a peck of trouble we should all be spared now!*

"*I shan't pretend that the family won't fight like tigers. I've noticed that people who uphold free love never want to see their daughters trying it; and the people who say a divorce is better than a loveless marriage never care to try the experiment near home. I feel that myself: I should be miserable if Imogen or Joyce went through the divorce-court. I should hate it if they married a man who'd been advertised as being unfaithful. I hope that's honest enough! I can't be surprised if they hate the idea of my marrying A. after a divorce. In addition, daddy and mummie both feel he's too old for me, though daddy's fifteen years older than mummie and A. is only twenty years older than me and extraordinarily young for his age. Colin is opposed* *on different grounds: in his heart I'm afraid he despises A. because he wasn't at a public school and all that sort of thing. Not daring to say so in words, he pretends A. is an unscrupulous adventurer. I'm afraid I can't cope with prejudice of that kind.*

"What Imogen and Joyce really think I can't guess. I believe they got it into their heads that A. wanted to take advantage of 'poor little Auriol's' youth and innocence; and now, when they find his intentions are strictly honourable, they go on opposing from sheer force of habit.

"Yes, there will certainly be a colossal row; but I'm of age and no one can stop me. In time I hope the darlings will see that they were just the least little bit prejudiced. That's not what I started out to say, though. I know to-night for the first time that, if A. still wants me, I shall go to him. In other words, I may be more or less engaged in a couple of weeks and married within a year. This is always supposed to be a very solemn time in a girl's life; and I'm trying to think out what my feelings are. If I'm to be honest at all costs, I must say I think the whole business is over-rated. More than that, I believe our elders and betters, without meaning it, are sentimental hypocrites: they say a thing's solemn because they think it ought to be solemn to us, not because they felt it was solemn when they were our age. I was frightfully disappointed over my confirmation, frightfully disappointed over my first communion: I was trying to pump more solemnity into myself than I was capable of holding. When I go to communion now, in a big church, I'm always miserable in the endless time after I've received the sacraments. Other people are on their knees, praying, but I've finished all I have to say in about two minutes. Am I more irreligious or frivolous than other people? Do other people repeat themselves? or is there a good deal of sham about the whole business?

"I certainly can't feel solemn now, not personally. I believe that A has it in his power to effect the happiness

of millions of people; and that's a very solemn thought. I believe I can help him. That's a solemn thought and a very great responsibility. I'll put on record here and now that I'll work myself to the bone to 'inspire' him, as he calls it, to keep him up to the mark, to make him happy, to take care of him, sinking myself and giving every ounce of whatever constitutes Auriol Otway to helping. In dear old Max's beloved phrase 'you can't say fairer nor that.' It's a solemn thought that I must fight to get my way. The family will come round in time; but family quarrels always leave scars, you're never quite the same afterwards.

"I cannot, try as I may, be solemn about any other aspect of marriage. A. and I are entering into partnership; and I hope we're married before a registrar. The marriage-service, frankly, disgusts me. Thank Heaven I wasn't born in the days when mothers whispered in their daughters' ears the day before the ceremony. I knew all that I needed when I was eight; and I learnt it at the home-farm. Thank goodness we no longer say 'an event is expected,' when we mean somebody's going to have a baby! I really believe we're becoming slightly more sensible in one or two ways. And, as we sweep away the artificial mysteries, we see—we must *see—that marriage and child-bearing have been given a sentimental and grossly exaggerated importance. When I marry A., I become his wife and the mother of his children. That's part of my job, like sitting at the head of his table; I don't give it another thought.*

"A far more ticklish question is one that most people wouldn't call solemn at all: I've no idea what to talk to A. about when we're alone. I don't know whether we read the same books or have the same tastes; I know extraordinarily little about his life or, indeed, about him. It doesn't do to dwell on this too much, though, or I shall find myself using some of Colin's pet phrases about 'different standards', 'difference of upbringing'. A. doesn't eat peas with

his knife. I shouldn't greatly care if he did. It's much more dangerous and much less dirty than eating asparagus with your fingers. And whatever he likes to talk about couldn't be worse than the number of pounds one horse gave another at Catterick Bridge. Oh, that week at Conway House! I'm devoted to Max and to his father, but that just about finished me.

" My main feeling at 'this solemn moment in a young girl's life' is that marriage is quite easy if you do your best, keep yourself in the background, avoid sentiment as the devil avoids holy water and keep the temperature low. It's difficult to do that sometimes, because men think you're heartless or frivolous. When Max and I pretended to be engaged, he was much more serious than I was. And, when I laughed at him, he became almost melodramatic and said I was very young, a time would come, I didn't realize the meaning of passion and so on.

" Poor old Max! I hope he won't take it to heart when I tell him. He can't say he hasn't been warned. . . ."

PART THREE

CHAPTER I

What The Day Brings

> " No doubt, you, good young lady that you are,
> Despite a natural naughtiness or two,
> Turn eyes up like a Pradier Magdalen
> And see an outspread providential hand
> Above the owl's-wing aigrette—guard and guide—
> Visibly o'er your path, about your bed,
> Through all your practisings with London town.
> It points, you go ; it stays fixed, and you stop ;
> You quicken its procedure by a word
> Spoken, a thought in silence, prayer and praise.
> Well, I believe that such a hand may stoop,
> And such appeals to it may stave off harm,
> Pacify the grim guardian of this Square,
> And stand you in good stead on quarter-day . . ."
> ROBERT BROWNING : *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau,*
> *Saviour of Society.*

I

WHEN the *Koh-i-nor* came within wireless-range of England, the first place on a long waiting-list had been secured in advance for the head of the mission. His message was in code, addressed to Max Hendry ; and the wireless-operator seemed professionally hurt when Miss Colthurst explained that an acknowledgement would be despatched and that Mr. Sheridan would like to have it without delay.

" He doesn't leave anything to chance," muttered the operator.

"If he did, he wouldn't be where he is now," answered Miss Colthurst.

"I'll give you the reply as soon as I get it," the operator promised; and Miss Colthurst departed in search of her deck-chair. "That girl will wear herself out, if she's not careful," he added sarcastically. "She's actually done a job of work; handed in a message, paid for it, counted the change. . . . If I felt equal to it, I should chuck this job and get taken on as a private secretary."

While Miss Colthurst's justification for existence was debated for the hundredth time in the wireless-room, Miss Colthurst abandoned herself to the pleasure of existence without attempting to justify it. Of all the mission she was the one member who had enjoyed every moment of the last six months. Even the typists, with homes on the sunless outskirts of drab cities, who would never again travel farther than Margate, were turning from their last sight of regal bougainvillea and blazing hibiscus to mutter wearily: "Only a fortnight more."

In the early days, when the world and her life stretched to infinity beyond the narrow horizon of the hour, Evelyn Colthurst too had thought of home. The tale she had to tell needed an audience; and half her delight came from the contrast between the measureless spaces which she was skimming like a bird and the dark cage in which, like a bird, she had been imprisoned for twenty years. The other half came from an ill-defined sense of achievement: she had set a titan on fire, she was valued as she deserved. Instead of gazing forlornly at clothes and jewels that must always be out of her reach, she was made to feel that the softest silk, the richest furs were hardly good enough to touch her precious body. She existed to be adorned, caressed, worshipped; the work of her life was to please. All this she had achieved on her merits, starting with no more advantage than a thousand other girls; and she had achieved it at no cost to herself. Envied she might be, but never despised, as she had once feared; hardly even suspected, rather taken at face value. "*Mr. Sheridan's personal secretary*": that was good enough in itself.

"Saucy lot, those wireless boys," she murmured in tentative resentment.

Then she fell to pitying them. Once, during her annual holiday at Bexhill, she had half thought of marrying one of them; and in those days it had seemed a fair match and more than a fair escape. They were officers, with uniforms. Now . . .

Now Evelyn felt she could not resent the curiosity which she aroused.

II

It was indeed quite amusing that nobody, inside the mission or among those they met, could explain her.

In dress, in speech and in the discrimination which she made between the different social grades of the mission, she was much more Sheridan's friend than his secretary. When the typists were sent to an hotel, she was always accommodated with the personal staff at Government House; and her visible secretarial duties, apart from any private work she might do, were confined to carrying from one room to another what Sheridan had written for some one else to type. Her own costly clothes and white hands were never subjected to the danger and indignity of work. At first the other girls had murmured against her; but, when it was understood that she was not dependent on a salary, their jealousy of her privileged position turned to admiration for the way she exploited it. In all probability she was "doing the government", she had "wangled a good thing for herself".

When the cynic voice of Geoffrey Mallock enquired why Sheridan should go out of his way to oblige her, she hinted boldly that she was an old friend of the family.

Growing fertile in imagination, she added that she had always wanted to travel, but that it was difficult for a girl to travel alone and more difficult to find a friend with the necessary leisure and means. Whether Mallock was convinced she never knew, but a legend sprang up that she was being shewn the world in return for the nominal services of arranging Mr. Sheridan's parties and writing his private letters. In their travels they were always meeting girls who were coming out to keep house for their relations or to be given "a good time" for three months. It was easier to believe that she was one of these than that the head of a government mission, being entertained by the king's representatives and living under sleepless observation, should dare to flout the opinion of the world.

"Unless he thinks it's so fantastic that he can do it with impunity," reflected Mallock, who had given many weeks of thought and observation to the superficially refined and innately common "personal secretary" without being able to make up his mind what to think of her.

"Nearly home now, Miss Colthurst," he called out, when he found her pulling a chair towards the door of the wireless-room.

"Oo yes! Worse luck!" she answered.

"Um. I shan't be sorry to be back in England, though it was worth it."

As he passed on to complete his daily total of fifteen times round the deck, Evelyn sank into reverie. Worth it? Of course it was! She had never harboured a doubt till that morning when Mr. Sheridan gave her the message to despatch: *Hendry Rotarius London Poinsettia Sheridan;* they were in communication by relay with Devizes. Now she realized that everything was coming to an end. He would see her later to "discuss arrangements", whatever that might mean, and she felt heavy-hearted.

Worth it? She would have liked a translation of "poinsettia". Did it stand for: "*Arriving Friday advise Colonial Office and Mrs. Sheridan meet me Southampton*"? After all this time together, she had a right to be told; but during six months at sea and six months before that in England Mr. Sheridan had told her nothing. She followed at heel, like a shadow, and was given no more of his confidence than a shadow enjoyed. It was worth it, in spite of that. *Poinsettia*. . . . Did that mean, ultimately and when they had discussed their arrangements, that they would have to part for a time at Southampton? It would be an abrupt end, but no more abrupt than the beginning. Twelve months ago . . .

A murmur of voices floated to her from the wireless-room, punctuating the vibrant crackle of the transmitter. The curtain over the doorway was drawn aside; and Mr. Sheridan straightened his long back and nodded to her. Had he been satisfying himself that the message was despatched, leaving nothing to chance? It must be very important!

"The Azores on Monday, with luck," he told her.

"I wish it wasn't the end," she sighed.

Sheridan smiled indulgently and strode away, turning to call back, in his "employer's voice", that he would not require her until the afternoon. Worth it? At an hour like this, when the sun was hot before the brown decks were dry for their late scrubbing, she wondered how she could ever have hesitated. Lying in a white silk jumper and skirt, with her bare arms folded behind her head, she looked over one infinity of rippling blue sea to a second infinity of unclouded blue sky, the whole so silent and majestic that it might have belonged to a dream. More than once, in the last year, Evelyn had been tempted—in the threadbare drapery of her rare fancies—to "pinch herself and make sure she was awake." If any one had told her, eighteen months ago, that she was destined to travel round the world, first-class, with her own bathroom and a stewardess who was to all intents and purposes her maid, she would have crushed the prophetess with a racy retort acquired in the days before she became a lady. Eighteen months ago . . .

Eighteen months ago she was living at Enfield and working in the offices of Andrew Livingstone, Fanshaw and Company, solicitors, of Coleman Street, in the City of London. She was—incredible thought !—glad of the job, for the utmost charity of her school could not strain itself to call her more than "slow". She owed her position to the frightened urgency of her father, who begged Mr. Andrew Livingstone to take pity on a girl who was honest and willing, even if parental love could not call her intelligent. Mr. Colthurst, for thirty years the unaspiring cashier of the firm, had reached the stage in his career at which the partners, reviewing the annual applications for increase of salary, always said : "He's not worth another penny. If he thinks he is, he can try elsewhere." The cashier accepted his yearly rebuff with the resignation of long practice : he knew, and the partners knew, that he was too timid for a mutiny, too stupid for a fraud ; and the transitory qualm that assailed both sides at the end of every year was satisfactorily set at rest when Mr. Colthurst begged that his daughter should be given a trial as "general clerk".

Within a week the general clerk had been converted into a general messenger. Evelyn's looks, on her first day in Coleman Street, caused one patrician client to say : "Girls in that class have no *business* to be so pretty"; and the hearts of the younger clerks began to be inflamed to the detriment of their work. Thereafter Evelyn was only seen in Coleman Street when she signed the attendance-book or returned from one mission to collect papers before setting out on the next. The new life pleased her better than the old in that she now spent half her time seeing London from the top of an omnibus and the other half being seen, with undisguised admiration, by barristers' clerks, by barristers and occasionally by lay clients. It was on a mission of this kind that Evelyn first met Ambrose Sheridan.

Cleveland Row. . . . After all these months she could still recall her excitement on being sent there with a bundle of transfers. Mr. Sheridan—she was made to repeat his name—had to sign each in the place where his initials were marked in pencil; as a witness was required, she must actually see him signing.

" And then come straight back here," snapped the sour old commissionaire, making a note of the time. " No fooling round West-End shops."

In fact, Evelyn never went back to the prison in Coleman Street, but even now, after eighteen months, she was undecided whether she had not missed something by not going back to tell the sour old commissionaire that she was never coming back. He was probably there still, in his little glass box, with his old steel spectacles on his old nose! . . .

III

THROUGHOUT her journey from Coleman Street, Evelyn had ransacked her memories of film-settings for an adequate vision of Cleveland Row.

Double doors, she decided, would be flung open by powdered footmen in knee-breeches. She would enter a vast marble hall, with a fountain in the middle. After wading through a yielding desert of rich rugs, she would see a huge, double writing-table at the end of a book-lined room. At her approach Mr. Sheridan would draw himself to his full height; and Evelyn had not surreptitiously fingered the illustrated papers on the railway book-stalls without becoming acquainted with Mr. Sheridan's giant form. He would bow and say: " Pray be seated." Perhaps he would offer her tea ; and Evelyn experienced an agony of mortification when she realized how shabby her cheap clothes would look against that splendid background.

Even now, after all these months, she remembered her shame. She remembered, too, a feeling of confused resentment that some girls, without half her looks, should be born to enjoy, as of right, rich food and beautiful clothes and parties and everything that made life worth living. She was herself a clerk's daughter ; she could look forward to marrying a clerk ; and, if she were foolish enough to have children, they would be clerks. Enfield for one generation after another. At home she was precluded from ventilating her discontent lest her father, borrowing Mr. Livingstone's annual challenge, should say again : "*If you think you can do better elsewhere, you're welcome to try.*" Evelyn had tried and failed : tried with a firm of film-producers, who bustled her to the front of the waiting line as soon as they saw her ; she had failed within an hour, when a husky manager roared in frenzy : "She's half-witted ! Take her away ! She doesn't understand a word I'm saying."

After that, Evelyn confined herself to less ambitious flights, abandoning the film-studio for the dream-life that was represented there. Why should she *pretend,* when she had a chance to *be?* Every theatre, every serial pointed the way. She was not clever, but she was beautiful ; and, when a girl was beautiful, there was always some god-like man with a square jaw and curly hair who insisted on marrying her (The duke, his father, might raise ineffectual opposition ; she might even break off her engagement and disappear ; but the duchess would bring her to the bedside of her languishing boy, with the magnanimous admission that she was as good as she was beautiful). After her failure in the studio, Evelyn hunted assiduously from her omnibus-top for god-like men with stern, strong profiles. She was still hunting when she reached the bottom of the Haymarket and a constable directed her to Cleveland Row.

Eighteen months ago. . . .

Evelyn walked to the side of the ship and watched the gamboiling of a school of porpoises. After a year and a half it was still impossible to think of that time without a little shiver. Truth to tell, she had never allowed herself to think of it : her twenty years of life could be expressed in two pictures, the first against a background of Enfield, with the Coleman Street office in the centre and a dynasty of clerks passing in at one door and out at another. The second picture was framed on the boat-deck of a liner in mid-Atlantic, between blue sea and sky, with a long chair in the middle and, in the chair, a slender white form. She had never, till now, brooded over the transition ; but Ambrose Sheridan, with his talk of "arrangements to make", forced her to pass the last eighteen months in review. Was it worth it ? She had decided at the time that it would be ; but was it ?

"That depends on the 'arrangements'," Evelyn whispered helplessly.

In looking back, she felt that helplessness had been her constant attitude ever since the butler shewed her into Sheridan's study. There had been no powdered footmen, no fountain in the hall ; and, before she had time to notice the carpet or the book-lined walls, an impatient hand was snatching the transfers from her grasp and an impatient voice muttering "D'liver this my act deed. Next one ! Ambrose Sheridan. D'liver this my act deed. Next . . ." Then the mutter had ceased and the racing hand had paused. As though conscious for the first time that she was not a machine, Sheridan changed his tone to ask :

"What's happened to the clerk Livingstone usually sends here ? A red-haired boy ?"

"He's left," Evelyn answered.

"I don't wonder. No life for a boy of any parts: dashing about London with papers to sign. Have you had any tea?"

For a moment Evelyn could not speak: this was what she had dreamed, but her dreams had never come true.

"I shall get some when I've taken these papers back," she heard herself saying.

Sheridan picked up his pen; and, at the first faint scratch, his mind once more seemed to forget her.

"No life," he repeated. "D'liver this my act deed. Dashing about London. It's no life for you," he added abruptly.

Evelyn looked deliberately round the long expanse of wire-fronted book-cases. No reply seemed to be expected of her; but she found the gaze of his steady grey eyes disconcerting.

"It's better than a stuffy office," she put in, as the silence and his penetrating scrutiny set her flushing.

"Oh, possibly. You could do better for yourself, though. Take off that hat."

Unable to disobey, even if she had been so minded, Evelyn laid her hat on a chair and tried to cover her embarrassment with a smile as she tidied her hair. Sheridan examined her points coolly and critically, as though she had been a horse: the tapering, white hands against the loosely coiled dark hair, the big eyes and wistful mouth, the rounded neck in which she could feel strange pulses hammering, the bosom that rose and fell as he guessed at her shoulders and arms. This was more frightening than anything she had experienced in the film-studio; but in some way it was exhilarating. He approved of her hair and skin; of her teeth, when she smiled; of her ankles when he looked down to see if her feet were as shapely as her hands. Evelyn had heard that people liked contrasts; and, when he stood up to ring for tea, she wondered whether this ruddy giant was attracted by her smooth whiteness and fragility.

"I must take these back to the office," she ventured, extending her hand for the transfers.

"I'll send 'em by registered post. Are you happy at your office? Would you like to come as my secretary?"

"But . . . I've no experience!" Evelyn gasped.

"I'm snowed under with experienced people. All you need is . . . discretion. Perfectly discreet people see little and say less and never ask questions. Discretion is highly valued and highly rewarded. Are you discreet?"

"I . . . hope so, I'm sure," she answered, shuffling one foot against the other.

"Discretion and loyalty are the only two things I require. The work . . ." Sheridan smiled to himself. "You would find the life interesting. My duties throw me up against all sorts and conditions of men in all parts of the world." His eyes travelled again to the floor; and Evelyn found herself involuntarily trying to hide her shoes from his unsparing scrutiny. "Everything would be found for you, of course. A complete rig-out. I don't want you ever to feel you need envy any other woman her clothes. When we travel," he added casually, "it will be only . . . my discreet secretary and myself."

IV

It was the casual tone that overpowered Evelyn.

This was the way that handsome, rich, unscrupulous men tempted poor girls in film-stories; and poor girls defended their virtue by striking such men in the face, or had their virtue defended for them by opportune rescuers with square chins and curly hair. Evelyn always applauded the caption which proclaimed: YOU ARE INSULTING A PURE WOMAN AND YOU SHALL PAY FOR IT!

In her dream-life she had played the part a hundred times ; but, now that the dream was become actual, she could only stammer :

" I . . . I don't know what you mean."

" Rubbish ! " retorted Sheridan.

In the silence that followed, she watched him toying with a note-case and caught the rustle of bank-paper. With sudden resolution she reached for her hat. Sheridan smiled and tossed the case on to the table.

" Come here ! " he ordered ; and, when she hesitated, he caught her wrist and drew her to him. " I'm not a bad sort," he muttered into her hair. " You needn't be frightened of me. Tell me what your name is ! Evelyn ? You're going to have the time of your life, Evelyn. Always take what the day brings. Discretion : that's the only thing. Now your first job is to tell the office you're coming to me. Then the new rig-out. Get the best that's to be got, but don't go in for anything too flowery : in the eyes of the world you're my secretary . . . Now, you're not going to cry ! "

" I can't help it ! " Evelyn sobbed, though she never knew then or eighteen months later why she had cried.

It was not in conscious regret or fear, for she made no attempt to escape ; and, looking back, she felt none of the righteous indignation which she expected of a film-heroine. It was not in defence of her threatened virtue, because she knew that her virtue was only another name for her fear, though she felt he might have hesitated rather longer before demolishing her picture of a pure woman insulted. She cried as one of those who can only express emotion by tears and cry equally from happiness and misery, fatigue and surprise. Sheridan pressed her close to him with one arm, while the other hand stroked her neck and shoulders. He dried her eyes with a big silk handkerchief ; and she roused to find him kissing her lips.

Later, they dined in a vast and glittering room, surrounded by uncanny men who moved without noise and watched without ceasing. Evelyn drank a yellow wine of winking bubbles. It made her cough at first; and her head swam. Then she felt happily reckless, then sad and rather sick. When Sheridan put her into a taxi, she longed to tell him that their evening was a mistake and a bad dream: he refused to let her cry again; in the moment when she felt care-free and amusing, he had winced at her changed speech and bearing. Nothing she could do was right: it could never be worth while.

"Discretion," he repeated as his final injunction.

"I *can't* . . ." Evelyn began.

"Too late now, my dear," he laughed unsympathetically.

Was it worth while?

"*The Azores on Monday, with luck.*" They were returning. With luck? In taking what the day brought, she had never thought whether her adventure would seem worth while on the morrow: in setting out, she had never pictured the return.

It was worth while, in the early days, to flout her bewildered parents and to "hand old Livingstone Fanshaw the bag," then to drive from shop to shop, telling the taxi-man to wait; it was worth while, when she was asked if she would pay cash, to drawl—like these other costly creatures—"my account"; it was worth while, as her parcels were tied up, to observe the red hands and blunt fingers, the flat chests and bending backs of the girls who served her.

"Moddom is going abroad?" one asked superfluously, as Evelyn experimented with sun-helmets.

In her now unremitting pursuit of gentility, Evelyn had refrained from the beguiling sarcasm of explaining that she wanted the sun-helmet to protect her from November fogs in London. Such a retort belonged to the growing category of things which Ambrose Sheridan denounced as " cheap."

" Only for six months," she answered and experienced a fierce delight in the girl's little gasp of envy.

The gasp ended in a cough; and no one could say where the cough would end. Yes, it was worth while so long as she felt that she was getting good value; and good value it was to order these girls about and set them lifting and carrying till their thin arms ached. It was good value to think that one of them, as she coughed her way home to Enfield or whithersoever, would look down from the top of her omnibus in search of a dream-prince and weave an artless epic wherein she too ordered herself a six-months' outfit of clothes for a casual voyage round the world. Evelyn exhausted her ingenuity in causing trouble to waiters and stewards until that joy, too, was condemned as "cheap".

Life was abundantly worth while from the moment when she mounted the gangway at Tilbury. The ship, the passengers, the games and dances with the officers, the admiration which she and her clothes aroused: this was very heaven; and to one pair of eyes the leaden Channel sparkled with blue light and the grey sky shone with a sun which no one else saw. Before her delight had time to grow jaded, it was refreshed with beauty and romance such as a blind man could relish from hearsay: the great Rock of Gibraltar, Toulon and the Château d'If, Taranto, Suez and the Indian Ocean. Day after day, as she gazed over a landless sea, her heart knew only thankfulness. Sheridan, as he said of himself, was " not a bad sort "; and by now she had learned his ways and could pass effortlessly from the tenderest endearments to the coldest formality. He became ill-humoured when she talked to other men; but, if Evelyn felt bored when he disappeared for hours at a time with one of his other secretaries, he included her, as a compensation, in all the festivities that were organized for him on shore; and, while he sat closeted with officials, she was taken sight-seeing by *aides-de-camp*. By explaining impressively that she was a *personal* private secretary, Sheridan secured her invitations and exempted her from work.

Bombay; Calcutta; and all the wonderland between; Colombo; Rangoon; and Singapore. By now, Evelyn had followed Sheridan's advice and was taking what the day brought. At first she had occasionally wondered whether she was being very wicked; but her conscience refused to upbraid her. In theory, of course, every girl should be as morbidly virtuous as the heroines of the films; her mother had lectured her fiercely before allowing her to enter the Coleman Street office; and the parsons, given a chance, would always prose about sin. When once her new life had lost its strangeness, Evelyn could see nothing wrong in it: many more girls would do as she had done if they were not ignorantly afraid of the consequences; as the papers were always asking, why should there be one rule for men and another for women? If a public man like Sheridan could do as he pleased . . .

At this point Evelyn usually set herself to think of something else. It was a shock, though she ought not to have felt it, when she realized that others had filled her present place in Sheridan's life. She was fancying that she in her turn had overwhelmed him; when he was enslaved, she wanted him to marry her. Thereafter he ceased to be a figure of romance and became merely a rich man of uncurbed appetites; she feared that she was no longer a figure of romance to him and wondered where he would place her in the long catalogue of women who had attracted him. She wondered, too, what had happened to the others, but that was an imprudent line of speculation: perfectly discreet people, she recollected, saw little, said less and never asked questions. She was so discreet that she hardly wondered about anything and was startlingly compelled to reconsider all her theories of right and wrong when she heard that Ambrose Sheridan had been married for twenty years and that his wife was still living.

V

THE information was tossed to her by Miss Mellor, the principal typist, as the *Koh-i-nor* left New Zealand for Panama and England. Miss Mellor wondered whether "things" would have blown over by the time they got back.

"Why, you aren't giving out you don't *know*, are you?" she enquired incredulously, when Evelyn asked what "things" she meant. "It started within a month of the time you came; and it was going on under your eyes. Mark you, I don't *know* anything. I'm only putting two and two together, as the saying is. You've heard of this Miss Otway?"

"No," said Evelyn blankly.

"Ah! Well, I daresay I shouldn't have, either, if the lines hadn't got crossed one day when he was 'phoning. I must begin at the beginning, I can see."

Was it worth while? Of Miss Mellor's barbed confidences was born Evelyn's first doubt. Where did she come in? Mr. Sheridan was married to one woman, in love with another; and yet they could not mean much when he packed up for six months and went away with a third. When they stood ranged in line, one was taken and two were left. If there was a meaning in anything . . . He must belong to her, as she to him, though she had never tested her grip. Once or twice, when his mood was tender, she had prayed ecstatically that this dream-life might continue for ever. He never promised that it should. Once or twice she had framed questions that he could not avoid answering. He had always contrived to leave them unanswered, cheating her of even the dreadful certainty that came to haunt her when she could not sleep. And now, when they were within wireless range of England, she knew only what she chose to imagine from an unintelligible code.

A clatter of feet in the wireless-room broke in on her troubled reverie. The curtain was pulled aside ; and the chief operator, his sleeves rolled up to reveal hairy, tattooed arms, leaned out with a form in his hand.

" I suppose you were waiting," he hazarded. " Are you going down, or shall I take it ? "

" I will," answered Evelyn, trying not to snatch the paper from his hand.

" *Message received Hendry,*" she read, as she turned to the companion-way.

Mr. Sheridan was pacing up and down the sitting-room next to his cabin and dictating rapidly to Miss Mellor. Without looking at the message, he waved his hand vaguely towards a chair.

" *Now,*" he muttered five minutes later as Miss Mellor gathered up her papers. " This is just the acknowledgement ? Thank you. . . . Oh, don't go for a minute, Miss Colthurst ! I wanted to ask you . . ." He waited for the door to close and sat down on the table, swinging one leg. " Have you enjoyed it ? " he asked. " I told you I wasn't a bad sort."

For some reason that she could not define, Evelyn was afraid to trust her voice. Whether he had made her happy mattered less than that he had made himself indispensable to her. Other men might dominate her as overwhelmingly, but no other man could be like this one, the first in her experience ; to no other could she give what she had given him. A bad fellow ? He hurt her pride when he shewed her too patently that she was a female without soul or spirit, heart or brain, feelings or temperament ; a female without position or importance ;

but a female with a market-price which he was wantonly exceeding. She would not have minded a little unkindness if it made him more human by blotting the neat lines of their contract.

Catching his hand between her own, she smiled up at him with tear-dimmed eyes, offering her lips.

"You're a good little girl," said Sheridan with detachment. "Affectionate. Loyal. The first time we met I told you that I put loyalty above all things. Loyalty . . . and discretion. You've done a lot for me. And I'm grateful. . . . I suppose you'd say I was a happy man? Eh, Baby? Rich: successful. You'll know, when you're my age, that the most precious thing in life is companionship. Without that, there's no happiness. And I've never been happy because I've never had the perfect companion. And I *must*!" he continued, as though he had forgotten the girl in front of him. "I *will*." . . .

For long moments Evelyn struggled for breath. Then her rigid pose broke up at the shattering note of a bugle. Sheridan withdrew his hand to feel for his watch; and his eyebrows revealed ingenuous surprise when he saw that it was time for luncheon.

She, then, was not to be the perfect companion; he had forgotten her in his sullen brooding over twenty years of loveless marriage. He was leaving his wife only to marry Auriol Otway; by some masterpiece of contrivance in his cunningly contrived system of life, the marconigram had touched a spring. The reply, which he read again before pocketing it, told him in some way that the spring had responded.

With a sob choked down, Evelyn stood up and pressed her face against his chest.

"We'll talk about this after dinner," said Sheridan indulgently, "and you must tell me what you think of doing. God, how I envy you your opportunities, your youth! . . . Always take what the day brings." . . .

CHAPTER II

The Napoleon Touch

> "What followed? Just what he foresaw, what proved
> The soundness of both judgments—his, o' the knaves
> And fools, each trickster with his dupe,—and theirs,
> The people's, in what head and arm could help.
> There was uprising, masks dropped, flags unfurled,
> Weapons outflourished in the wind, my faith!
> Heavily did he let his fist fall plumb
> On each perturber of the public peace,
> No matter whose the wagging head it broke—
> From bald-pate craft and greed and impudence
> Of night-hawk at first chance to prowl and prey
> For glory and a little gain beside,
> Passing for eagle in the dusk of the age,—
> To florid head-top, foamy patriotism
> And tribunitial daring, breast laid bare
> Thro' confidence in rectitude, with hand
> On private pistol in the pocket . . ."
>
> ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau,*
> *Saviour of Society.*

I

PROXIMITY to England, made manifest by the prompt acknowledgement of Sheridan's wireless message, changed the atmosphere of the *Koh-i-nor* from empty resignation to brisk cheerfulness. The chief subject of conversation among the women was when they should begin to pack; among the men, how much they should distribute in tips. For the first time in many weeks a note of regret was heard that the voyage was coming to an end. The facetious paraded their old jests for a last airing; the quarrelsome laid aside their old enmities in the soothing belief that they would have to meet their fellow-travellers but seldom again.

His last days on board were spent by Sheridan in completing his interim report. Already, six days from Southampton, an air of expectancy was blowing out to meet him. The prime minister sent a message of welcome; Lord Orpington submitted a proposal to entertain the mission at dinner before it disintegrated. England was beginning to throw her shadow over him; or, if any one preferred to put it another way, he was beginning to throw his shadow over England. Dining by himself, Sheridan listened with half his attention to the chatter from the surrounding tables. His fellow-passengers were wondering how they would find their families, their houses, their businesses. Would their friends be allowed to meet them at the docks? Would there be a special train? Delightful to be back in England after all this time, but strange. They would need weeks to settle down, weeks more to "get into things". There would be clothes to buy, for a start. . . .

"Muddlers!" Sheridan muttered.

His own house would be ready to receive him; his managers would be in attendance; his new clothes would have been made for him and his tailors would arrive to fit him on the day he landed. Max Hendry would be at Southampton with a summary of all the news; Rushforth and Livingstone would give an account of themselves before dinner.

And a letter from Auriol would end their farcical "experiment".

He had arranged it all with a message of one word, Napoleonically. Within twelve hours young Hendry would be driving about London, allotting each one his part. And each would play his part faithfully. The only person for whom no part had yet been found was this girl who travelled as "Mr. Sheridan's *personal* secretary" With her looks and with the money he destined for her, she should marry and marry well.

Walking through the saloon, absent-mindedly nodding to Geoffrey Mallock, he wondered how she would like Mallock for a husband. He was unmarried, in need of money. . . .

II

After smoking a cigar on deck, Sheridan went to his cabin; and, as he opened the door, he could tell from the scent in the air that Evelyn was waiting for him. In twelve months he had not killed her love for exotic soaps and powders.

"We were interrupted," he reminded her, "before you could tell me what you wanted to do when we get back."

"I want to stay with you," Evelyn replied without hesitation.

Sheridan shook his head and sat down in a low chair so that he should not seem to be towering despotically over a suppliant.

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

For a moment, the hardening of his tone daunted her; then she came to his chair and touched his hand timidly:

"Don't you love me any more?" For the first time Sheridan observed that she was wearing a scarlet silk kimono. He had mistaken it for the dress which she had worn at dinner; but it seemed to have been assumed in his honour, with the pearls which she was not allowed to wear in public. No doubt it was in his honour that she had slipped her bare feet into a pair of high-heeled scarlet shoes which he had chosen for her. "You *once* said . . ."

Sheridan withdrew his hand under pretext of searching for another cigar. How these creatures dragged things up against a man! How literally they took an empty compliment! And, the stupider the woman, in his experience, the harder the parting; the more docile at the beginning, the more tenacious at the end.

"I take back nothing that I ever said. It's not *your* fault, my dear: you're all that you ever were. More." The close-fitting film of scarlet revealed every line of her slender body. Her arms, when the loose sleeves fell back, where white and soft as newly fallen snow. Under the high crown of fine dark hair, the big eyes and wistful lips were frightened again, as on the far-off day when she had come to him in Cleveland Row. Since then, however, she had learned to keep the warm little hands smooth and comely; she had learned how to poise herself on her high heels, how to move and, at this moment, how to droop. Before he could stop her, she was curled on his knees, with her hands clasped about his neck. "*More*," he repeated deliberately. "That's not the point, though. You must have known this couldn't go on for ever . . ."

"But I want it to!" she cried with the first note of passion that he had heard from her.

"You don't really. What you want is a husband you can acknowledge; children; a home. I can help you to make a home; and I can help you to marry comfortably when you've found the husband . . ."

"But it's *you* I want!"

Sheridan unclasped the clinging arms and lifted the girl into the chair. Then he walked to the table and cut his cigar. Unless properly handled, this child would lose control of herself and make a noise.

"It's not possible. Don't compel me to say that again," he rejoined sharply. "Now, I don't suppose you want to go back to your people; so, if you tell me where you'd like to settle . . . And, if you have an occupation of some kind, it will give you an answer for the people who wonder how you live. The rest, the people who don't know you, had better imagine that some one has left you money. We shall see each other next week at Lord Orpington's dinner ; but that winds up the mission and we shan't meet after that unless I arrange it specially. You had better let me know about the house some time before next Thursday. Now is that all clear ? "

Though the protecting cigar was now aglow, it seemed hardly to be needed. Evelyn sat curled in the chair as he had set her there : one knee thrust under the other, painfully, though she seemed unconscious of physical pain ; one foot turned in, ungracefully, as though she were indifferent to grace.

With an effort she stood up and tried to look Sheridan in the face. Though she had never imagined herself the heroine of such a scene, she had realized, ever since Miss Mellor's first confidence, that such a scene might end such a drama as her own. The films gave little guidance ; and she was driven to invent her own action for betrayed and discarded heroines. Sometimes, in these ultimate conflicts, the girl convinced her lover against his will, refusing to be discarded and burying the betrayal beneath a subsequent marriage. Sometimes she threw his cheque in her lover's face, fiercely whispering that she might give but that she would not sell. Never, in imagination, had she been too much dazed to resist.

" I understand," she answered.

" If there's anything . . ." Sheridan began.

Evelyn tried to speak, but her parting lips gave vent only to a single, inarticulate moan.

" You'd better go to bed," Sheridan recommended.

" Don't send me away yet ! " she cried. " Not yet ! Can't you see I do, honest to God, love you ? "

Too quick for countering, the white arms were once more about him, the lithe, warm body clinging to him like a trembling scarlet flower ; the tear-bright eyes and quavering lips were upturned for his kisses.

Sheridan shook his head. The scarlet flower fell crumpled to the floor, straightened itself and disappeared. Though the air was still heavy with scent, Sheridan found he was alone: alone and shaken; more moved than a woman of this kind had ever moved him before. Perhaps he was not yet tired of her himself; certainly he had not been loved before with an equal abandonment.

And yet who could say "certainly" of any woman? She might have been hoping to bind him in the chains of his own passion; she might be preparing a last appeal to pathos. It mattered little one way or the other: Evelyn Colthurst vanished from his life in the moment when she carried a one-word message to the wireless-room. Until it was written, he had not decided what to write: he could say, with perfect honesty, that he had taken six months to make up his mind; having made up his mind, he could not, with perfect honour, continue this relationship.

"My wife, when we marry, will have a right to expect . . ." he mused. Remembering the touch of Evelyn's white arms, he felt that he had behaved with something like nobility in resisting her. "For no one would have known. *Now* I should be *wronging* Auriol . . ."

Latching the door open for the last breath of scent to escape, Sheridan went on deck to finish his cigar. He was interested in the ethics of this last encounter. *Imprimis*, as a man, he needed women in his life; all but the married were a fair prey for a bachelor, but, once married himself, a man must cleave to his wife. Should the marriage come to an end, as between his own wife and himself, he was free once more to follow his fancy; when a new marriage was arranged, he must cleave to his new wife. Nothing could be clearer.

It would have been idle to explain all this to Evelyn. She would not have understood him, she would have thought he was trying to justify himself; there was no saying what she would have thought. His enemies muttered that Ambrose Sheridan could always justify anything he did ; Ambrose Sheridan, on the other hand, never did anything he could not justify. There lay the difference. He thought before he acted ; when he acted, he acted swiftly and decisively, as with that marconigram. The Napoleon touch, as some people liked to call it .

III

Six days later the *Koh-i-nor* was tugged into Southampton.

The reporters, racing one another to be first on board, were guided to their quarry when they found a length of deck roped off opposite the gangway. The head of the mission, standing like the leader of a decorous boarding-party, was protected by a bodyguard of secretaries, a vanguard of permanent officials and a rearguard of servants. The secretaries carried despatch-boxes in pigskin cases ; the officials carried black wallets of imitation-leather, stamped with the royal arms ; the servants carried the hand-luggage of others. And Sheridan carried nothing.

To Max Hendry, coming on board a gangway-length in advance of the pressmen, the grouping was not only premeditated but practised. Was this not Saturday ? Had not the cameras of the Sunday papers competed for stances before even the *Koh-i-nor* was tugged into range ? Max regretted that he had no excuse to be in uniform : his salute would have been so adequately taken by the operatic figure before him ; and Sheridan had been received by so many betabbed *aides-de-camp* in so many colonies during the last six months.

" Chaliapin in *Ivan le terrible,*" Kenneth Doyle murmured frivolously.

" Never heard of the horse. What's he done ? " asked Max.

" Later," was the whispered reply

Sheridan shook hands impressively and accepted from Doyle a letter in the colonial secretary's writing.

"I shall be seeing Orpington this afternoon," he said, handing the letter to Max. "Now lead the way, please."

Two minutes later he was in his carriage, with Max opposite him and an open despatch-box between them. By the door a telegraph-boy stood slowly counting the words of the messages which Max handed him. The photographers took up advantageous positions on the platform; the reporters collected names from all who would impart them; and the relations of the secretaries and officials stole forward for a glimpse of Ambrose Sheridan at work.

As the train began to move, the head of the mission went to the window and hailed a paper-boy. A joke was made; the photographers caught him smiling; and the reporters noted that "*Mr. Sheridan appeared to be in the best of health and spirits.*" Then he withdrew his head and returned to the letters which Max was silently offering him.

"And things at home?" he enquired. "Before I meet any one else."

From Southampton to Waterloo the "director of intelligence" primed his chief with the latest news. Mrs. Sheridan was better than Max had ever seen her. Tony was his usual self, leading his usual life; and rumour whispered that he was paying assiduous court to Lady Margaret Selhurst, who at present was unresponsive. Livingstone was very well. Kenneth Doyle, by the way, was being divorced. Public affairs? Economically, the country was thriving; industrially, the only menace came from strikes in areas where wages were not keeping pace with profits. The cost of living and the total of unemployed were lower than at any time since 1914. The income-tax had been reduced; money seemed plentiful. In consequence, Mr. Standish's government seemed more firmly seated than any of its predecessors of the last twelve years.

" And how much credit do *I* get for that ? " asked Sheridan.

" Less than you did, I'm afraid, sir," Max answered. " People are forgetting . . "

Sheridan smiled grimly. Standish and his colleagues were very like the mayor and corporation of Hamelin. They would bilk the pied piper if they could, pretending that they had been saved independently of his piping.

" They'll remember, I daresay, now that I'm back here again," he predicted.

" Oh, yes ! They're expectin' something pretty big . . ."

Max described the fever of excitement with which the return of the mission was being awaited. The voices which cried that Sheridan should be taken into the cabinet had increased in number during the last six months ; and, though the constitutional changes foreshadowed in his speeches were not of a kind to arouse popular enthusiasm, his report would get a sympathetic hearing.

" Indeed, anything you say . . ." Max added.

" You wouldn't include ministers among my supporters ? " asked Sheridan.

" They've said nothing one way or the other. I ought to warn you, sir, if you're seein' Lord Orpington . . ."

Sheridan's attention quickened ; and he nodded thoughtfully as Max described the growing resentment of the colonial secretary at the attacks on his department and himself. It was common knowledge by now that he had wished to resign and had only retained office to oblige the prime minister. The threat was being held in abeyance until Sheridan's return and was likely to take effect unless the proprietor of the Sheridan press dissociated himself from the attacks delivered in his absence and gave an undertaking that they would not be renewed. "An apology and security for good behaviour in the future" was the phrase which the colonial secretary had used; and Max only softened the impact of the message to avoid offending his irascible chief. The last six months had not, so far as he could judge, made Sheridan readier to apologize or to promise good behaviour.

"I must see what the papers have been saying before I can tell whether they've said too much. If Orpington goes, who will take his place?"

"People seem to think you will, sir. Those who don't like you say that's why you've been runnin' this campaign against him. Those who like you say this would be a good opportunity for gettin' you into the cabinet. Those who don't care one way or the other on personal grounds say that the best chance for your recommendations is for you to push them yourself from the C.O."

"And what does Sir John Ferrers say?" asked Sheridan acidly.

"I haven't asked him because I didn't think he mattered. He don't cut as much ice as he did six months ago. As long as he and his friends controlled the second eleven, they could do what they liked with the P.M., but the second eleven's broken away. If Ferrers resigned, Standish would have no difficulty in fillin' his place. I don't say he'd welcome you, sir, but he can't keep you out."

Sheridan looked narrowly at the frank young face opposite him and then stared out of window. Max, evidently, was handing on the gossip of the hour without trying to influence his auditor in any direction. He seemed sorry that his old friend Orpington might have to make way for his present master, but he was unaffectedly glad to see the former boycott of his present master breaking down.

"Very interesting!" murmured Sheridan with a glance at his watch.

If he had to meet Orpington within an hour, he must devise a formula for smoothing the colonial secretary's ruffled plumage. Success could sometimes be almost too complete: he had not counted on finding the door of the cabinet already open; and at all costs he must secure six months or a year without allowing it to be closed in his face or allowing himself to be forced over the threshold. A year was certainly not too much for the divorce and its attendant buzz of criticism and the rival distraction which he would have to arrange and the marriage with its second buzz and then the second rival distraction.

"Orpington's too touchy," he commented.

"He's been such a popular idol all his life," said Max; "this is the first time he's ever come up against a bad press."

"But to run away . . ."

"He's not sorry for the excuse, sir. He'd prefer to go without bein' pushed, but he's sick of the whole political business. If he doesn't clear out over this, he'll clear out over your report, by sayin' he's not enough in sympathy with it to do it justice."

"Um. He can't make that excuse, because he won't have my final recommendations for a good many months. I'm only giving him the interim report to-day. There's a mass of detail to be worked out. I've still to get in touch with South Africa. Six months at the very least," he added half to himself; "probably a year. Assuming Standish authorizes me to go on along the lines I'm proposing. And he *will!* It doesn't commit him to anything. And he'll say it'll keep me out of mischief. It would be absurd for Orpington to resign *now*. He needn't fear I'm going to attack him unless he compels me. Tell him that, Hendry! Or I'll tell him myself. . . . This second eleven you speak of?"

"Well, sir, I think the poor old P.M. was gettin' rather tired of bein' told that, if he didn't do this or that, Ferrers and his lot would resign and nobody would take their places. He set himself to find out if he couldn't collect a few substitutes to play. And he has. Lord Otway told me . . ."

" Is Otway in this ? " Sheridan interrupted.

" You might call him the captain of the second eleven, sir."

Sheridan nodded and looked again out of window. This supplied the link he had been seeking. It was Otway who had persuaded the prime minister to erect the Trade Commission, thereby gaining for himself six months to set his daughter's mind against the head of the mission ; he had no doubt hoped in those days that the mission would fail and its head be discredited. Now, when its head obstinately refused to be discredited and his daughter no less obstinately refused to be set against him, the tactics were changed.

" As they can't get rid of the cat by any other means," Sheridan reflected, " they'll choke him with cream."

The cabinet, with Otway flinging open the door and Standish hurrying forward with welcoming hands ; the cabinet, whether he liked it or not ; the cabinet, six months or a year before he was ready for it. Ingenious, Sheridan decided. Men like Otway were not to be despised. Ineffectual in business they might be ; but they were tenacious where their families were concerned and they shewed a pretty resourcefulness when intrigue was required.

" It's very good of all these people to come down on my side after all these years," he laughed. " It doesn't occur to them that until I've finished my present job . . ."

" I suppose, sir," Max ventured, " if the P.M. asked you . . ."

" One thing at a time ! I can undertake nothing for six months. I should have thought they *must* see that for themselves. . . . Vauxhall! We're running in Tell Mallock I shan't want him again to-day."

IV

At Waterloo the scene was staged to indicate, for the benefit of the assembled pressmen, that Mr. Sheridan was not so much "*arriving in London*" as "*taking leave of his colleagues*". By the time that Max had opened the door and got himself out of the way, a protecting double cordon had formed to fend off too curious spectators. As the cameras were once more levelled on him, Sheridan descended majestically to the platform and shook hands with his mission. When he came to the female staff, he bared his head and passed along with a comprehensive bow on either side. A democratic touch was added at the end when he shook hands with the messengers who had accompanied the mission.

"Napoleon reviewing his troops," Geoffrey Mallock murmured to Doyle. "'*You were at Lodi, you rascal, eh? And Marengo.*' It's charming to see how much pleasure he gets out of it all."

"It's amazing that people should be taken in by his buffoonery," Doyle grunted.

"Perhaps they see that he's something more than a buffoon," said Mallock, with less than his usual irreverence. "I went out to curse and I stayed to pray. He's a bit of a genius, even if he's more than a bit of a bounder. I've worked with him for six months and I know. Mark my words, we shall hear more of that young man," he predicted flippantly.

"I daresay. Well, I shall see you on Thursday. Blue Peter's giving you all a dinner at the House."

"I know. I've prepared Sheridan's speech for him," said Mallock. "Tasty little thing. Good-bye."

As the head of the mission took his last farewells, Max cleared a space by the door of his car and stood by for orders.

"I shan't have anything more for you at the moment," said Sheridan. "I shall see you at dinner . . ."

"To-night, sir?" asked Max. "I've promised to dine with the Otways."

Sheridan looked at him in surprise, which Max interpreted to be surprise that any one should presume to make independent arrangements. It had seemed safe, however, to calculate that no work would be done on the first night.

"An old-standing engagement?"

"No, sir. Only this morning. You remember your message said I was to deliver that letter to Auriol. She asked me then."

"Oh, then I won't upset your plans," said Sheridan. "The other letters you can distribute now."

Stepping into his car, he resisted an impulse to ask how Auriol had received her letter. Of what it contained, nothing was to be said until he had seen her. Her reply—a thing of six blurred, throbbing words, with an envelope endorsed "*URGENT*"—had reached him on board at Southampton; and the other letters which he had written at the same time, six months ago, could be delivered.

"You can drop me at the Colonial Office and take the car on," he told Max.

While he flattered poor Orpington, calculated Sheridan, the others—Laura, Tony and Livingstone—would have time to realize once and for all what he intended to do. They would meet, like the members of a board who had received a copy of the agenda before the meeting, to carry out what they might have carried out six months before if they had not refused to face facts when the facts came like brickbats in their eyes. He had not changed; Auriol had not changed; and these others, if they compared the dates when the letters were written with the dates when they were delivered, would see that he had known all the time that he would not change. The opportunity of saying "*I told you so*" would not give him back his lost six months. But for the obstinacy of those who would not face facts, half the battles that still lay ahead of him would have been fought and won by now.

There would be a battle with the Otways; and that would be like wrestling with a mummy. A battle with Tony; and that would be like grasping a jelly-fish. A battle with Laura, which would be like trying conclusions with a ghost. A battle with Livingstone, who had an offensive way of making him feel that he was battling with his own better judgement.

"If you want me, sir, I can easily dine with Auriol some other night," said Max, as the car turned into Downing Street.

"I don't want to upset any arrangements you and she have made," Sheridan answered.

Auriol had evidently not broken the news to her little playmate. That, presumably, would be done at dinner; and Sheridan permitted himself a smile before picking up his despatch-box and preparing to face a half-circle of cameras by the entrance to the Colonial Office. Young Hendry was only about five-and-twenty; no fool; a good-looking boy; and one born in a rank of life where everything and every one came easy.

The race, however, was not always to the swift.

V

FROM the Colonial Office Max drove to Cleveland Row.

"He's arrived all right," he told Laura. "Very fit and in great form I was to give you this letter . . "

"But . . . isn't he coming here?" she interrupted.

"As soon as he can get away from the C.O. I say, you *have* improved this room!"

Affecting an enthusiasm which he did not feel, Max examined the new curtains and chair-covers. This must be a nerve-wracking day for Laura, wondering how Sheridan would meet her; the curtains, the flowers, the ready tea-table seemed rather pathetic if he was not going to notice them. And, for all Max knew, there might be something in store for her worse than the old neglect. Kenneth Doyle had hinted months ago that Sheridan was going abroad to escape a scandal; and, when Max tried to understand why a man should write letters that were only to be distributed on his return six months later, he could not help wondering whether there was not something rather serious in the wind. Was Sheridan consulting Livingstone about a separation? Telling Laura that he could not go on with this cat-and-dog life any more?

Holding her letter with one tremulous hand, Laura was digging with the other at the crack below a flamboyant lake of sealing-wax. The point of the letter-opener missed; and she waited, breathing deeply, trying to breathe calmly, for her hand to become steady. Fingering the material of the curtains, Max wondered what Sheridan could have written. "*While I'm away, I want to think how we can make a fresh start. There can't be any question of separation; and when you receive this . . .*"

He might be saying that. . . .

Or he might, even six months ago, have written: "*I feel that six months can do no good. I am not a child. In six months' time we shall stand where we are standing now. When you receive this letter, it will only tell you that the 'pause for reflection' is at an end, that I was right (though one takes little pleasure in remembering it) . . .*"

That, too, he might be saying. . . .

It could only be one of the two, reflected Max, impatient as the deathly stillness of the room began to tell on his nerves. Then he bit on his impatience: it was only one of two choices, when you waited for the foreman of the jury to say "guilty" or "not guilty"; when you waited for the doctor to say "nothing serious" or "no hope". . . .

Laura had put down the letter-opener and was ripping the envelope with her fingers. Only one of two things. One or the other. Apparently it was the other. . . .

"Nothing wrong, I hope?" said Max.

She started as though he were shouting at her, then craned forward as though she had not heard him. Her eyes seemed alternately to stare and peer, as though he were alternately surging, gigantic, against her and receding, diminutive, into shadow. Max realized suddenly that she was likely to faint and stepped forward to catch her. As he supported her to a sofa, she looked at her reflection in a mirror; and Max felt that, for her, the mirror had swept up on the last wave of movement.

"Giddy! . . ." she muttered; and they stood side by side before the wraith of a Burne-Jones woman, who seemed to droop through life, whispering and languishing.

Then he laid her on a sofa and rang the bell.

"Your maid . . ." he muttered. "I say, look here, I never believe in buttin' into other people's affairs, but we've been 'awful good pals . . ."

She opened her eyes and then turned away from him: "Oh, physician, heal thyself!"

Max read the addresses on the other envelopes to give her time to compose herself.

"If there *is* anything I can do . . ." he muttered.

"You can't! No one can! I'm afraid . . . unless a miracle happens . . . there's dreadful unhappiness coming to many of us. I can't say more now . . ." she whispered, as the butler came in.

Max waited till he could hand her over to her maid and then returned to the car. It seemed as if Kenneth Doyle had been right and that, under cover of a government mission, Sheridan had been sent abroad, like any hope-of-the-family who had entangled himself with a girl in a tea-shop, to get over it. And, apparently, the girl from the tea-shop had won.

"Goin' off the deep end?" Max asked himself.

It was no part of his duties to suspect people, but he had never been able to understand why the beautiful and brainless Evelyn Colthurst had been engaged as a secretary unless she was intended to be much more than a secretary; he had never understood why his circumspect chief invited obvious, inevitable criticism by taking the girl round the world with him. And yet, if she was the "girl from the tea-shop" ("Good title for a musical comedy," Max decided), there was no cause for heroics. There had been others before her. Sheridan was not thinking of marrying her. Still less was he thinking of running away with her at a time when his political stock was soaring.

"S'pose I shall hear in good time," Max decided.

Coleman Street, in the late hours of Saturday afternoon, was almost deserted; and at the door of Andrew Livingstone, Fanshaw and Company, he found Andrew Livingstone hurrying away towards the Bank station.

"Letter from Mr. Sheridan," Max announced from the window of the car.

"Mr. Sheridan?" echoed Livingstone. He was advertised to be back by now. If he was back, why should he write? If he was not back, how could he? "When did he get in?"

"This afternoon. I met him at Southampton. This thing was written some time ago, but I was only to deliver it when he gave the signal."

"I see." Livingstone thrust the letter, unopened, inside his hat. "Anything else?"

"No. Is there any answer?"

"You can say I've received this and that I'm taking the necessary steps." So Livingstone was expecting something! He balanced an engagement-book on the sill of the window and turned the leaves, pencil in hand. With one long leg braced against the running-board and two long arms holding the book at the greatest possible distance from the big head and bulging eyes, he seemed more than ever like a tadpole on the verge of changing into something else. "I should like to see him as soon as he can spare time. Is he at his house?"

"On his way there. I left him at the Colonial Office."

"Ah! Mrs. Sheridan knows he's landed?"

"Yes. I've just taken her a letter."

"Well, I mustn't keep you then."

Max drove to Buckingham Gate, where he found a loaded taxi by the door of Tony Rushforth's flat and Rushforth himself, attired for the week-end in the country, leaving his address with the hall-porter.

"Letter from the chief," Max announced.

"A letter . . . ?" The tone of surprise closely resembled Livingstone's. "When did he land?"

"This afternoon." As the letter was tugged from its envelope, Max watched for a change of expression. "If there's any message and you have a train to catch, I'll blow in on my way home."

"Message?" Rushforth repeated vaguely.

Then he turned back to the opening of the letter.

No confidences here, Max decided. Tony looked half-dazed, very much as his sister had looked an hour before; and Max tried to yoke them with the phrase that Laura had used about "unhappiness coming to many people", unless a miracle took place. *Was* Sheridan running away from his wife, ending his public career, shutting up shop in England? That would account for the letters and for the reaction they produced. It would account for Livingstone's colourless phrase about taking the necessary steps. And it all fitted in with Kenneth Doyle's story:

the family had sent Sheridan abroad to bring him to his senses and he had come back to the family in a mood of reckless self-confidence which Max had been privileged to sample in the train from Southampton. "Great unhappiness for many people": Max did not know whether to be sorrier for Laura or for the girl in the tea-shop, but he could spare no sympathy for his present companion. This business would cost complacent Tony his job; and it was almost the only thing that would ruffle his complacency.

"I . . . Look here, I shall miss my train, if I'm not careful," said Tony, coming out of his stupor with a start. "Tell Ambrose I've had his letter. I may telephone." Social self-importance mounted uncontrollably to his head and banished for a moment the memory of the disturbing letter. "I'm staying with the Orpingtons."

"Give 'em my love," said Max. "Nothing more?"

He returned to St. James' Street, dressed at leisure and drove across the Park to Manchester Square.

CHAPTER III

"The Man Himself Being Judge"

"Here are you picked out, by a miracle,
And placed conspicuously enough, folks say
And you believe, by Providence outright
Taking a new way—nor without success—
To put the world upon its mettle: good!
But Fortune alternates with Providence;
Resource is soon exhausted. Never count
On such a happy hit occurring twice!"
ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society.*

I

ON arriving at Lord Otway's house, Max found Auriol in an apple-green panniered dress, with a cloak over her arm, awaiting him in the hall.

"I made a mistake this morning," she told him. "There's an immense family-dinner; and, as I want to talk seriously to you, I thought you might like to take me somewhere else."

"I'd love to. The old spot?" he enquired; then, uneasily, "You're not going to be high-brow?"

Auriol laughed perfunctorily:

"No, I can promise that. Tell the man to drive to Bellamy's. And then tell me what you've been doing since 'we two parted in silence and tears,' whenever it was."

"Silence . . . ?"

"It's a quotation, dear. Byron."

"Oh! You ought to wave a flag when you're goin' to do things like that. Tell me about yourself first. You look better than I've seen you for months."

"I seem to know where I am for the first time in a good many months, which is a relief . . . in some ways. You've been a wonderful friend to me, Max. I'm afraid I've sometimes been very tiresome, but you'll make allowances when you know everything. I hope you always *will* be my friend, Max . . ."

Suddenly losing the gaiety with which she had received him, Auriol lapsed into silence and stared out of window until they reached their destination. In the Octagon Room of Bellamy's, half restaurant and half dancing-floor, Max chose a table in a remote alcove and ordered dinner. While the cocktails were being prepared, he suggested to Auriol that they should dance; and, when she sat listlessly as though she had not heard him, he pulled her to her feet and set himself to muster spirits enough for the two of them.

"I'd have let you know soon enough, if I thought you tiresome," he assured her. "As for bein' friends, I can't imagine anything that would make me change." His hand was pressed in gratitude; and he gripped her to him until her scented chestnut hair brushed his cheek. "If I hadn't been so well brought up, I'd kiss you in full view of the band, just to prove it."

"You mustn't do that. And you mustn't hold me so tight." They danced round the room in silence while Auriol collected her courage. "In fact, you must give up kissing me altogether."

For answer he drew her to him again, touching her ear with his lips. She was like a flower. Her skin had the soft sweetness of a rose.

"Behave yourself, Max!" she whispered angrily. In jerking her head away, she nearly jerked herself out of his arms. "I'm going to sit down. I shan't dance any more."

"You're not angry, are you?" Max asked. "It wasn't really a kiss."

"Whatever it was, don't do it again! I suppose it was my fault for not speaking before. We can be friends without kissing. Or if we can't . . ."

This petulant harping on the friendship *motif* threatened to become wearisome.

"I don't follow what you're drivin' at," Max complained.

"Because you never listen when I try to talk seriously. I've told you again and again, for instance, that I'm not going to marry you. I don't know whether you believe it . . ."

"I don't."

"Well . . ." Auriol found herself suddenly out of breath. "Well, that's my job to-night, to *make* you believe it."

II

WHILE their waiter handed the cocktails and hovered over Max's chair with a wine-list, Auriol waited to drive her lesson home in a form that could not be mistaken.

So many conversations during the last year had begun in this way! Sometimes Max had ended them by making her laugh (he was maturing a jest now as he looked at her over the top of the wine-list); sometimes they had quarrelled and she had missed him too much to withhold her forgiveness; most often she had beaten ineffectually against his mailed front of incredulity.

"You'd be convinced if you heard I was engaged to some one else?" she asked when they were alone. "Or would you be too sure of yourself even then?"

"I'm sure of *you*, which is much more to the point."

"And if I married some one else?"

Their waiter approached with a waggon of *hors d'œuvres;* and Max made deliberate choice.

"If you marry some one else," he answered in his own time, "it won't matter whether I'm convinced or not. I shan't be there to see. Even then I shouldn't be convinced. If you were capable of marryin' any one else, you just wouldn't be you. God knows I shouldn't want to keep you. Go! With my blessin'! I should wish the other feller joy of you. The girl who could play a trick like that wouldn't be the Auriol I know. . . . But why drag up this dreary business?"

"Why should you call it a 'trick'?" Auriol demanded furiously. "You don't pretend we're still engaged?"

"Oh no! I shan't bring an action for breach of promise. . . . I say, I've just remembered there's an 'r' in the month. What about an oyster?"

As he turned to look for the waiter, Auriol felt that yet another opportunity was being snatched from her.

"I don't want any, thanks," she told him. "And, Max, I really can't let you talk to me like this. Why d'you say you wouldn't be 'there to see'? Don't you want me to be happy? You once said that if it was the man in the moon . . ."

"That was some time ago," he interrupted. "I've always said I'll stand aside for any one who'll make you happier than I can, but you'll never be happy if you can chop and change, engaged to one feller one minute and another another, bein' very fond of every one all the same. We were engaged once; and your people—quite properly, as I see now—refused to recognize it till I had something to marry on. You said you'd wait. I told you I'd never complain if you changed your mind. That was a square deal. You've never told me that you *have* changed, though for the last year I could see you had some one else in mind. And pretty wretched it's made you! When you said to-night that you knew where you were at last, I felt the other business was all over. I'm sorry, Auriol, but I'm hanged if I can go through this racket again, bein' pushed into the cold when some one else comes along and then bein' pulled back into favour when you've turned the other feller down. If you say you've changed and don't care for me any more, I'll clear out." . . .

"But you don't understand! I'm as fond of you as I ever was!" she broke in. "I don't know what I should have done these last months if it hadn't been for you."

"Then there's no question of your marryin' anybody else."

"Can't I be friends with you unless I marry you?"

"My Lord, would you stay friends with a man who behaved as you talk of behavin'? If I'd told you I'd wait, if I'd come to you whenever I wanted cheerin' up . . ."

"I thought you were being disinterested," Auriol muttered.

Max bit back a rejoinder that would have matched her own.

"Come and dance," he suggested.

"'*What'll I do*
When you
Are far away
And I
Am feeling
Blue?
What'll I do?'"

Auriol shook her head, resolved that this time at least she would not shirk her duty. In spite of the sentiment that was talked, there could apparently be no friendship between men and women when once passion entered in, with its attendant demands and jealousies.

"I didn't think you *could* misunderstand," she sighed. "While I thought you loved me unselfishly, I didn't mind what I took from you. Was it only words?"

"Was it only words when you said you were bound as much, whether we called ourselves engaged or not?"

"That was some time ago!" she mimicked him.

"I don't know that we set any limit. . . . For heaven's sake, though, don't let's spoil a jolly evenin' by rowin'! Finish up that stuff you're eatin' . . ."

As he stood up smiling, Auriol had difficulty in suppressing a scream of impatience:

"No! Sit down! Max, we *can't* drift on like this! *I'm not going to marry you.* There! Good Heavens, don't smile! It hurts me! Max, I *am* marrying some one else. I swear it's true. I don't want to hammer it in, but you make me. Do you believe it now?"

For many moments there was no answer in words, but Auriol saw conviction being born at last in his staring eyes. The smile faded; the pale cheeks, flushed a moment before by the heat of the room, lost their transient colour; the lips quavered till he covered them with his hand.

"Who . . .?" he asked, after two unsuccessful attempts.

"I mustn't say yet."

"You don't feel I have a right to know?"

Auriol looked round the filling room and answered him in a whisper, careful to keep her eyes from his.

"Sher . . ." Max choked, with the name half spoken. "Is this a joke?"

"That letter you brought me . . ." she faltered.

"Ah, yes! Letter . . ." Max answered dizzily.

The band was giving an encore; a dozen couples were dancing; scattered waiters leaned against the walls, with bunched napkins under their arms.

"*What'll I do*
When you
Are far away
And I
Am feeling
Blue?
What'll I do?"

"Sheridan?" Oblivious of her presence, Max was beginning to mutter sleepily to himself; and Auriol listened in helpless fascination to the broken sentences. "Kenneth Doyle right after all . . . And 'the girl in the tea-shop' . . . My lord, *Auriol!* *Now* I see . . . Everlasting rows with her family . . . Don't wonder Tony looked a bit white about the gills . . . And Laura . . . It's broken her heart, you could hear it break . . . And the feller shook hands with me, travelled up from Southampton opposite me, knowin' all the time. *Poinsettia* . . . Premeditated. Arranged in cold blood months ago and touched off in mid-Atlantic . . . '*Physician, heal thyself*' . . . But he's an old man! He's trodden the life out of one wife already. An old lecher, too. Skin like a rose-leaf . . ."

Auriol leant forward and laid her hand on Max's wrist.

"I've left my bag outside. Excuse me a minute!"

"One of the waiters . . ." he mumbled, then went back to his broken sentences. "*Me* of all people . . . He knew, of course . . . That's why he did it . . ."

Two minutes later the head-waiter came to his table with a pencilled note: "*I have gone home. I couldn't bear to see you suffering. My dear, my dear, you must try to forgive me for hurting you. Auriol.*"

Max pocketed the note and called for his bill. While it was being fetched, he wandered, bare-headed, into the street, followed by the commissionaire with his hat and coat.

III

AURIOL let herself in with her latch-key and hurried on tip-toe through the hall.

As she passed the door of the dining-room, she heard a sustained mutter of vehement voices and guessed that the servants had left the room. The family-council was in session. Much good, much harm, much anything it would do! One must choose one's own faith in politics and religion; one must choose one's own wife or husband.

> "*For nothing can compensate his mistake*
> *On such a point, the man himself being judge:*
> *He cannot wed twice, nor twice lose his soul.*"

Unable to face another altercation so soon after her parting from Max, she locked the door of her room and lay down on the bed. A phrase from some play haunted her: "*Oh, and I wanted so much to sleep to-night!*" Was it Paula Tanqueray, very near the end of her tether? Auriol unlocked the fateful letter which Ambrose had written before sailing; but it savoured too much of a manifesto to comfort her, just as his conversation always savoured too much of a public speech.

"*I have done futile things in my life, but never any that I knew beforehand to be futile. . . .*" She turned to the next page: "*As you are of age, we need not discuss whether he will approve of such a marriage. . . .*" And to the next: "*Weird and wonderful tales will be told you about me, but you know that I trust you.*"

Auriol locked the letter away and drifted without purpose about the room, staring at books and pictures that commemorated the passing phases of a life that had swung the full circle of change since the days when that modern, precious room had been a common nursery. There were photographs of Colin in uniform, of Joyce in her bridal dress and of Imogen bending over her first baby; there was a family group, with herself disguised by a straight fringe and "bell-rope" plaits; there were water-colours of Lokshott by a starving artist whom Lady Otway had befriended. No one else would sacrifice wall-space to such mediocre work, but Auriol felt that a bad picture of her beloved home was better than none. And life at Lokshott, though doubtless they all had their troubles there, now seemed a golden age, before the war, before any of them grew up, before she went to Cambridge and returned with ideas.

"*As you are of age, we need not discuss whether he will approve of such a marriage.*" . . .

Auriol felt that her father could not be dismissed quite so easily as that, though in truth she had dismissed him as easily herself in the moment when she promised to marry Ambrose. If only the family would accept an accomplished fact! If only her father would come out of the family-council to say: "*You are old enough to know your own mind. You're not doing this in a hurry. You are the best judge whether you will be happy* . . ." Unfortunately, he was far more likely to say with heart-breaking patience: "*To begin with, he's old enough to be your father. He already has a wife whom he's succeeded in making miserable. If we knew the history of his relations with other women, it wouldn't be a pretty one; and there's no reason why you should hold him when every one else has failed. Your head's turned because you've fascinated an unquestionably able man. You're too young to know your own mind. It was only the other day that you thought you were in love with Max Hendry and wanted to publish the engagement.*"

"It *will* be that," Auriol sighed, "unless they go on with this business of saying nothing."

Ever since the spring, when her parents went to Rome and Auriol suggested that there was one subject which they might profitably leave undiscussed for six months, no reference to Ambrose, apart from his public work, had been made in her hearing They all knew that Max had brought her a letter from him; no doubt they had all seen, in the basket outside her room, an envelope marked "*URGENT*" and addressed to "*Ambrose Sheridan Esq., M.P., Passenger on board S.S.* Koh-i-nor." They could guess why she had insisted on dining alone with Max; and, at the family-council, they were probably agreeing that, until she gave them a lead, they had best hold their peace and trust to the coercive logic of events. Sheridan, they were saying, was not yet divorced; anything might happen in the next six months.

Meanwhile, she was unable to give them a lead. Ambrose, in his letter, had implored her to say nothing to any one until he had seen her. In talking to Max, she had given herself leave to make an exception because Max stood in an exceptional relationship to her.

"I don't know how I'm going to make Max understand," Auriol told herself, turning uneasily from side to side.

The scene at their interrupted dinner would haunt her all her life. She could never wear green again for fear of the memories that this apple-green, panniered dress would conjure up. She hoped Max did not think she was running away, but she could not sit there while he talked to himself like a man whose brain had been stricken.

She was tossing and moaning in her sleep when her mother came in next day with a breakfast-tray.

"I just wanted to make sure you were in," explained Lady Otway. "As you didn't come to say good-night . . ."

"I was in bed before you'd finished dinner," Auriol answered.

"That sounds as if you hadn't enjoyed yourself," said Lady Otway, setting the tray in safety and laying a cool hand on the girl's hot little fingers.

"I didn't." Auriol curled herself into a bow to make room for her mother on the tumbled bed. "I thought it was time to have things out with Max. I've known for ages that we should never marry, but he got rather hot and bothered when I told him. He'll get *over* it, of course. I simply won't let Max quarrel with me . . ."

"You talk rather as though breaking an engagement were no more than cutting a dance," commented Lady Otway. "The spirit of the age, I suppose."

"If Max won't be friends, it'll mean he's thinking more of himself than of my happiness," Auriol pouted.

"That's not an uncommon thing with people in love." Her mother looked thoughtfully at the slight figure curled about her. Auriol seemed unconscious of her body, taking little pride in it, feeling no bashfulness for it. She was developing later than her sisters and far later than most girls of her age. "The difficulty with you, Auriol, is that you've never been in love You're friends with people, but you never go mad about them."

"I'm naturally not sloppy . . ."

"You must be a little mad if you're going to be happily married," said Lady Otway. "You can't face the disillusionments of marriage in cold blood. Until you feel you'd rather die than live without a certain man . . ."

"I've never felt that with Max," Auriol broke in.

"Or with any one. But never forget that other people may feel passion while you're still cold and that, in that state, there's hardly anything they won't do. It doesn't matter that the woman hates them and tells them so; they still want her." . . .

With a shudder Auriol saw again Ambrose Sheridan's face when he asked if she could not see that he was in love with her. She heard again, with a second shudder, Max's rambling voice as he talked to himself.

"For once in a way I'm glad not to be a man," she sighed.

"A woman in love is worse than a man. The world would have come to an end long ago, otherwise. Women are slower to move, but they are moved more deeply. So don't despise people who are caught by passion: it may be your turn next."

Lady Otway bent down to kiss a frown from her child's hot head. The little homily on passion might become invested with a meaning in the future; but, in

Auriol's present state of development, a lecture on alcoholic craving would have been as serviceable.

"What's every one doing to-day?" asked the girl in patent eagerness to turn the conversation.

"Your father and I are going to church. After that, he has to see Peter Orpington. We're lunching with Imogen and Philip. They expect you, by the way . . ."

"I'm afraid I must stay here. I'm expecting a telephone-call . . ."

Lady Otway looked into the dark-ringed hazel eyes. They held a secret: one that Auriol would guard stubbornly, one that frightened her in some measure, but not one that occasioned shame or remorse. She seemed to have made up her mind and was now only restless and unhappy till she should have declared herself.

"I thought you'd be interested to know the Max affair was over," said Auriol.

"Then it's just as well you didn't marry him when you first talked of it. I only hope *next* time . . ." Lady Otway leant forward and lifted Auriol from her pillows till the chestnut head was reposing on her breast and the girl's white arms were twined about her neck. "I shall never encourage or discourage you again; I'm not clever enough. I see no reason why the marriage I might make for you should be any better than the marriage you make for yourself. You ought to marry: it's a mistake for girls to take lovers. It's a mistake to marry out of your class if you're going to stay in England. Perhaps I'm narrow-minded; I hate mixed marriages. But I don't know any more than I did at your age, about marriage or anything else. Unlike the rest of this peculiar family, I don't pretend to; but then I only married into the family, I'm a Heneage."

Auriol lay back on her pillows and pressed her throbbing temples. Peeping through her mother's mask of common sense was a most romantic idea of passion;

but nobody nowadays did in fact die of unrequited love.

"Aren't you being too physical?" she asked. Of Ambrose it would be absurd to say that she would rather die than forgo him. "If I were a great chemist and I met another great chemist, some man who would help me to revolutionize science . ."

"Share his laboratory, but not his house," Lady Otway urged. "It's not safe to marry without love till you're too old for love to matter."

As soon as she was dressed, Auriol telephoned to invite Max to lunch with her

"'*The man himself being judge,*'" she murmured to herself.

Her burden had in some way become lighter since she discovered that she had to bear it unaided.

IV

"SAY I'm not at home and you don't know where I am," Max instructed his man on being told that Miss Otway wished to speak to him. "Everything disorganized by Mr. Sheridan's return. Then you might see if you can get through to Sir Mark. Tell him I should like to come up to Newmarket if he has room for me. After that . . ."

After that, he did not know what to do; and, dropping into a chair, he tried to distract himself with a pile of Sunday papers.

It was curious that, to the public, he should seem most firmly allied to Sheridan at the moment when, after a necessary exchange of candour, he was leaving him for ever. The *Illustrated*, the *Looking-Glass*, the *Trumpeter* and the *Stop-Press* were full of the *Koh-i-nor's* arrival; and, in four pictures out of six, he found himself shaking hands or standing stiffly to attention until the great man should be ready to notice him. In size, Max had to admit, if in nothing else, Sheridan must be considered a great man, he stood half a head taller than Kenneth Doyle, who was no pigmy; and the shadow cast by the dropping daylight covered the width of the deck and disappeared beyond the field of the camera. If you chose, Max fancied, you could think of that shadow creeping eastward and lengthening with every minute's decline of the sun. You could see it stretching over the water and climbing the docks, projecting itself to London and slowly mounting the walls of Cleveland Row and Buckingham Gate, Manchester Square and St. James' Street. . . .

"Laura. Tony. Auriol . . . Me," he muttered. "I wonder what the others . . ."

Tossing the papers on the floor, he seized a hat and hurried through the September sunshine to Cleveland Row. If he sat brooding, he would go out of his mind. And, until he had seen Sheridan again, he could not be sure that the last twenty-four hours had not been a nightmare.

The secretaries' room was full of visitors, when he arrived, but, on putting his head in at the door of the work-room, he was told to come in.

"Though I shan't have anything ready for you till to-morrow," said Sheridan, looking morosely at the papers stacked on every table.

It was no nightmare, then. Sheridan was real and had really come back.

On his way from St. James' Street, Max had prepared a speech for his chief. Confronted with him, he found that he could not deliver it. Sheridan would not understand. It would glide off his tough skin like a homily on gentleness from the shoulders of a gladiator.

"Can you say at all how long it will take you to get straight, sir?" Max enquired. "I don't want to leave you till you've settled in."

"Leave ?" Sheridan echoed in surprise.

"Yes, sir. I have to go abroad."

"Where ?"

"I'm not in a position to say yet, sir."

"Oh ?" Sheridan stood up and took a slow turn to the end of the room, his head bent forward and his hands clasped under the tails of his coat. Clearly as though he were speaking, his frown proclaimed slight wonder and slight annoyance that some one had been talking. Not Laura, he was thinking: she was too well broken. Not Livingstone: he was too discreet. Nor Tony: he was too craven. It must be Auriol, who had still to be broken. "We'll talk about this later. If Livingstone's in London, I should like to see him."

Max wandered through the secretaries' room and tapped at the door of the library. The new curtains were half drawn; and he was reminded of his fancy about Sheridan's long, merciless shadow, mounting the walls and dimming the windows of one house after another.

"Laura ?" he called into the unfamiliar darkness.

"Mrs. Sheridan is not down yet," answered Livingstone's voice.

"Oh, I bin telephonin' to your place. The chief would like to see you," said Max.

"I suspected he might," said Livingstone grimly. The shadow had touched Evelyn Gardens, then, or whatever shell covered this dry, taciturn solicitor, who should by now have been in the train for Woking, there to play two rounds of golf with other mummies, thence to return for dinner and endless discussions of port wine with yet more of the same breed. "I wanted to have a word with Mrs. Sheridan, though: she must put a stopper on this business. . . . How much do you know ?"

It was the first time that Livingstone had given a hint of unbending; and, though the one thing that Max knew for certain was also the one thing he was least ready to discuss, he felt he must school himself to speak of Auriol without blenching.

" I know Sheridan's thinkin' of another dip in the lucky tub."

" It must be stopped," Livingstone declared. " I was against it six months ago, but *now* . . ."

As though despairing of more eloquent reasons, he threw Max a pile of Sunday papers marked with blue pencil. There was "reason to believe", Max read, that Mr. Sheridan was well pleased with his labours ; there was " reason to believe " that the days of *laissez-faire* were numbered and that the government, which was to be congratulated on having chosen such a man for such a task, would shortly be in possession of a considered policy for co-ordinating the trade of the whole empire. For all the attention that had been bestowed upon them, the trading possibilities of the British Empire had been as little developed or fostered as those of the old Germanic confederation. It might well be that the Sheridan scheme would place its author among the architects of a new order, on the plane of those who had created imperial Germany from the chaos of the medieval empire.

It was hardly, Max decided, the utterance of a man who contemplated retiring or being driven from public life.

" He's got a good press."

Livingstone nodded. The press might perhaps be too good. One voice was demanding to know why a man like Mr. Sheridan had no place in the government ; another found him a niche at the head of the Colonial Office by calling for the resignation of the present incumbent : " *Lord Orpington, whose picturesque personality and well-merited popularity on the Turf are hardly a compensation for sustained incompetence as an administrator* . . ."

" A divorce will send all this up in smoke," predicted

Livingstone. "I told him before and I shall tell him again: he'll make the third to Parnell and Dilke. Why, you have a test-case in Kenneth Doyle. It will be the end of everything. And what that means . . ."

The solicitor broke off aghast at the task of furnishing Sheridan with the imagination to picture some thirty years of fretting inactivity, passed in a backwater from which he could see younger, less expert hands, fumbling with his craft. All this and more had been said and said again, six or eight months before, when the idea of divorce was first sprung on them. Had Sheridan, whose six-months-old letter might have been written by a wilful child, learned anything in the meantime? Had he bamboozled himself into thinking that now, as always, there must be some special providence fighting for Ambrose Sheridan, some breach being made for him in the laws that confined others, some low cunning at work to secure him the best of both worlds?

"He's been *too* successful!" Livingstone fumed. "He doesn't see he's become national property in the last few months."

V

MAX turned, as the door opened slowly, and hurried forward as Laura Sheridan came in.

"I . . . wanted to tell you I was sorry," he whispered.

As they shook hands, he felt his fingers gripped.

"I suppose . . . it's what I expected all along," she sighed.

"I hadn't an idea till last night," Max answered between his teeth. "I heard there was some one, but I never dreamt it was Auriol. Why should I? Good God!"

Livingstone came forward and shook hands, murmuring that he would see if Ambrose would be disengaged soon. As he left the room, Laura sank listlessly into a chair and covered her eyes.

"I made sure you knew. When you seemed certain of her, I began to pluck up courage for myself; and, when you seemed to cool off, I hoped you were setting your teeth and it wasn't hurting too much. . . . She *ought* to have told you, Max."

"She *said* often enough. . . . I thought she was raggin' . . . I hadn't any money . . ."

"My dear, Ambrose didn't give you three or four hundred a year for nothing! It was to keep you from earning more, becoming independent. I *did* warn you against that."

"But what are *we* goin' to do about it?"

Laura's thin lips closed in a straight line; they parted to utter the one word "submit", then closed again.

"But . . . !" Max leapt to his feet, as though a broad way of escape had been marked in flame from heaven. "Good God! If you *refuse* . . ."

Laura shook her head sadly:

"I can't refuse. I would if I could. I've been brought up to believe that when people are married, there can be no new marriage while they're both living . . ."

"Then . . . !" Max cried hopefully.

She shook her head.

"He's not asking me to marry again. If he marries again after I've divorced him, he'd say that was his affair. If I don't give in now, I must give in later. He'll say I'm ruining his career, he can't think or breathe without this . . . *child* to inspire him. He can squeeze me in so many ways. Tony . . . Ever since our mother died, I've felt responsible for Tony. I've no savings. I've not been allowed to collect any. I must give in." There was a long silence; and, when she spoke again, her voice had regained its calm as though the last battle was over. "I shall set out my terms quite clearly," she resumed, half to herself. "He must make Tony secure . . ."

Livingstone returned to say that Rushforth had arrived that moment from the country and was closeted with his brother-in-law.

" Making him see reason, I hope," the solicitor added, without conviction.

Max decided that the issue must be desperate for Tony to have cut short his visit to the Orpingtons. Potent and terrifying was the shadow that had stolen over the gorse and bracken of Sussex to the safe, consoling walls of Selhurst. Tony was threatened with destitution. As in the first days of the war, " the end of all things " yawned at his feet. He, even he, Max felt, must be recognizing that, if Sheridan insisted on a divorce, every man of self-respect must come out boldly on the one side or the other; and he must come out boldly on behalf of his sister. Once out, he must stay out; it was impossible to denounce Sheridan at one moment and to take his money at the next. He must forgo the reflected glory which he derived from "Ambrose", " my brother-in-law", "my brother-in-law Ambrose Sheridan". And then?

The door was thrown open; and Tony came in moodily with a vague nod to the group by the fire-place.

" He refused to discuss anything," he announced.

" He'll have to discuss things before I help him to commit political suicide," said Livingstone.

Tony emptied a chair of papers and threw himself into it.

" He won't allow it *is* suicide. He thinks the public is in the mood to forgive him whatever he does. If he's wrong, he says, it won't matter. Everything will have blown over and been forgotten in a year. And it will suit him very well to work quietly for six months or so on his new scheme."

" But, if Orpington resigns—as he threatens—Sheridan won't get six months," said Livingstone. " The papers are making him a hot favourite. The moment a vacancy occurs . . . That's about the one thing that will stop him in his present mood."

"Unless . . ." Tony muttered, with a glance at his sister.

Laura shook her head and walked to the door.

"I promised him, you see," she explained. "If they were of the same mind in six months . . ."

Then she went to her room. It was impossible to say again that she was unready to be told she was spoiling her husband's life. If only she could get a moment with him, she could promise there would be no opposition from her; but more and more people were coming to see him, their cars and taxis were stretching farther than her eye could reach and the door was opening and shutting every few minutes.

"Whatever you will, my dear one," she whispered, dropping on her knees beside her bed. "It always has been, hasn't it? You might know it always would be. Truly, I've been thinking of you the whole time. I can forgive any one if you're happy. Whatever you will . . . And whenever you will. We won't say good-bye, because you may need me. I shall never be far away. You are keeping my heart with you. And I . . . I'm taking away the memory of all our happiness together. Thank God for that! You don't grudge it . . . ?"

She checked in her whispered soliloquy, finding her eyes damp and her lips trembling. This was no way to steel herself for the encounters that lay ahead, for the parting, for the aimless empty years after. If she could only say, as Fouché said of the Third Empire: "*It was good fun while it lasted*"; if she could be light of tone or cynical, it might help her to straighten her back and keep her head erect. Of the last twenty years, ten had been such that no one, surely, could want them to be prolonged.

"If I remembered how often he'd been unfaithful to me . . ." she began.

The memory, nevertheless, brought no bitterness with it. Early in their married life she had found him untruthful; later he shewed himself to be vindictive, though he talked of "self-defence" and of "teaching people a lesson"; he was unscrupulous, cruel and childishly vain. And still she loved him. Was it that his own love in the first years atoned for all that he made her suffer afterwards? Did his faults make him more human, reducing him from a god she must worship to a boy she could mother?

"I shall remember that I once won your love and then tried all my life to deserve it. I shall remember that I believed in you and that sometimes you said I had helped you. No one can rob me of the days when you lost faith and the days when you were ill and the times we won through together. God gave me twenty years of you; and for ten of them you belonged to me. I shall remember that."

She telephoned downstairs to say that she would lunch in her room. To-morrow, at this time? How many more days and nights would she spend here, looking down on the tree-tops in the noonday sun or, in the gathering dusk, watching the red sky darken till the imperious towers of Westminster melted into the night? The furniture in this beloved room they had chosen together; the tortoise-shell toilet-set on the dull-gold table; everything. Would this be Auriol's room, or would they take another house? Had he memories to bury, or would the house change for him when her own autumnal presence withdrew before this new dancing figure of springtime?

"How long . . . ?"

She dared not ask herself in words how long this first double intoxication would last. The Otways, she had always heard, had a dash of quixotism in their character; and, if Auriol found her husband betraying a friend or dishonouring an enemy, it would be idle to say that he had himself been dishonoured or betrayed by others, that he was striking before he could be struck, that politics was a rough school, or worst of all, that the end must justify the means.

" Please God she won't find him out till she's learnt to love him."

More remote but no less persistent than before, the front door was opening and closing. They were wasting their time, Mr. Livingstone and Max and Tony: hereafter Ambrose and Auriol must decide, ultimately they would be their own judges.

" Who is with Mr. Sheridan now ? " she asked the footman who brought her luncheon.

" Miss Colthurst, madam."

Laura found that she had forgotten Miss Colthurst. She wondered how Ambrose would dispose of her.

CHAPTER IV

The Dynastic Question

"Well, how was it the due succession fell
From priest to priest who ministered i' the cool
Calm fane o' the Clitumnian god? The sire
Brought forth a son and sacerdotal sprout,
Endowed instinctively with good and grace
To suit the gliding gentleness below—
Did he? Tradition tells another tale.
Each priest obtained his predecessor's staff,
Robe, fillet and insignia, blamelessly,
By springing out of ambush, soon or late,
And slaying him: the initiative rite
Simply was murder, save that murder took,
I' the case, another and religious name.
So it was once, is now, shall ever be
With genius and its priesthood in this world:
The new power slays the old—but handsomely."

ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society.*

I

AT two o'clock Sheridan telephoned to say that he was having his luncheon sent upstairs to Laura's room.

When he arrived, rubbing his hands at the sight of food and at the recollection of a profitable morning, Laura was reminded of Max's description of him as "in great form". Already he had silenced Tony, overborne Mr. Livingstone and outwitted Max; he looked like a boxer at a country fair, challenging each and all to stand up against him.

"The papers?" he asked, as Laura turned to greet him. "I've not had time to see 'em yet."

"You've a good press," she told him. "I was wondering . . ."

"The papers say what I tell them to say," he boasted. "I'm not such a fool as to undertake a big job single-handed and then proclaim that I don't think much of my own work. You were wondering . . . ?"

"Whether this was a good time . . . Please understand I'm not going back on my promise, but every one tells me Lord Orpington is going to resign . . ."

"I smoothed him down yesterday. He'll resign ultimately, but at my time."

"The cabinet's waiting for you, as soon as there's a vacancy."

"It must continue to wait," said Sheridan, inspecting the dishes before him and beginning to load his plate. "I'm not ready for it yet."

Laura ate for a few minutes in silence before venturing to counsel him again:

"The prime minister feels very strongly about divorce. You heard about Kenneth Doyle?"

"Kenneth Doyle is equally insignificant in office and in opposition. And I should think more of the prime minister's feelings if I believed he would still be prime minister in a year's time. I'm sorry these things have to be, Laura . . ."

"Isn't it easiest for us to accept it as inevitable?" she asked uncomplainingly. "If we treat it simply as a business matter . . . ?"

"But it isn't!" The interruption had thrown him out of his stride and broken down his arrogance. He spoke impatiently, as though to chide her for being blind to his romance and for trying to cut short an interesting essay in self-justification. "A business matter? I'm evidently not to be given credit for any human feelings. Business . . . I've not enjoyed these last six months, Laura. I wonder very much if we shouldn't have done better to end everything ten years ago."

"We were happy in the early days. And for the last ten years I've always felt that if we could get back to them . . ."

"That's it!" Abandoning his meal, Sheridan pushed his chair back and began to pace between the long windows at the end of the room. "The static temperament. After a certain time women cease to develop: their vision, their energy are absorbed by their children, their houses; they don't grow with their surroundings. If I'd stopped too, ten years ago, we might have been happy; but my temperament is dynamic. The vision of yesterday became the achievement of to-day. If I stopped, I should die. And I felt I was stopping. I lacked inspiration. If we'd had children . . . What was the good of piling up money or accumulating honours if I had no one to leave them to? When you talk of a 'business matter' . . ." He looked up with returning impatience, but the figure by the table had disappeared. "Laura!" he called out; but the handle clicked as the door closed behind her. "A 'business matter'," he repeated, dropping into a chair and staring across the Park at the grey towers of Westminster.

II

Now that it was too late to retract, Sheridan regretted that allusion to children. It had hurt Laura, who seemed to mind less that she had ceased to attract him than that she had failed to provide him with an heir.

"Though why she thinks I should trouble to marry, otherwise . . ." he grumbled. "Life's short enough without needless worries." . . .

It was this very shortness of life, as youth melted into middle-age and as one contemporary after another stood aside in favour of a new generation, that first impressed and then haunted Sheridan with the transience of one man's achievement. When he died, he would become for three days a news-item of first-rate importance;

and his own papers at least would mourn him with leaded margins. Historians might refer to his present work as they referred to Durham's settlement of Canada; his name, like that of Rhodes, might be kept alive by the endowment of scholarships; but this was not Ambrose Sheridan nor his ghost nor his memory. Laura had failed to give him the son who would reproduce his build and features, filling his room, continuing his policy, inheriting and adding to his honours, moving from strength to strength when he himself lay like the cast skin of a snake

Laura, no doubt, would say that he had forbidden her to have children when she wanted them; but no woman who wanted children would allow herself to be forbidden.

When they married, so tragically young, he had failed —like all young people—to think of old age and death as things that would come to him too. Laura did not realize it yet, or she would not have talked inanely of the peerage that he could have for the asking. "*First Baron Sheridan.*" What worth had that, if it were followed by the statement that Lord Sheridan had died without issue?

Not sparing time to realize that he had driven his wife from her own room, Sheridan finished his luncheon and went down to the library. When a man's work was on a certain plane, when the fruits of it ripened after many days, when it needed to be watched and protected in its early development, such a man—a Bismarck, a Napoleon, a Cromwell; or, if these names sounded too big, a Cowdray, a Northcliffe, a Selfridge—must needs think dynastically. If the problem of this age was security, one man might shew the means of making the world safe, but the men of the age succeeding must keep it safe. The saddest chapters in human history were those which followed the death of an Alexander or a Charlemagne and recorded the collapse of their work in the hands of their ineffectual heirs.

"And, by the way," Sheridan told himself, "if any one promised security to the people of this country, they wouldn't wait to ask if their saviour of society had passed through the divorce-court."

Wheeling a desk to the light of the long windows, he began to make notes. Security: if the people wanted security, he could promise it to them ultimately. All but the blind recognized that England in 1924 was no farther removed from war than England in 1914; verbal goodwill between nations and the pious hopes of impotent leagues would collapse before the first mobilization order. If England was to be saved, she must save herself by organizing her empire and by collecting the English-speaking peoples into one union.

The blue-grey towers of Westminster set him dreaming of the day when an empire should find itself and the senators from Canada and New Zealand should walk to their places in the first imperial congress. The land, the money and the men; the resources and communications; the experience and the will were all there if some one would only organize them. One law, one language and one currency from Hudson's Bay to Gough Island and from Socotra to Hong Kong. A *Pax Britannica* over one fifth of the inhabited globe; an empire of the west and east, with its capitals in Washington and London The future of the world lay with the English-speaking peoples; but their heritage was threatened so long as they remained unorganized against needless, chance wars. Security. . .

Sheridan was roused from his dream by a footman who came in to say that Miss Colthurst had called.

"Again? Shew her in," he answered. When the girl arrived that morning, unasked and unwanted, she had seemed hysterical and he had been careful to see her only in the presence of witnesses. " I can give you a minute, but it mustn't be more than a minute," he began as the door opened and closed again. " Well, where have you decided to live ? "

" I haven't thought." The girl looked at him for a moment and then lowered her eyes in confusion. " It's . . . it's something else. I came to tell you . . . It's . . ."

She sank into a chair and began to sob.

" What's the matter ? Crying never did any good to any one," Sheridan told her sharply.

" I c-can't help it. The doctor . . ."

As she hesitated, Sheridan's hand moved towards the bell. The hysteria was now explained. He allowed no one, however, to blackmail him.

" Well ? "

" He . . . he says I'm going to have a baby," Evelyn whispered in a single breath.

" That was not very . . discreet of you," Sheridan observed.

" Oh . . . ! "

She seemed too much startled even to cry ; and he could consider her dispassionately without the annoyance of a scene. In the first place, was her story true ? Others had pitched him a similar yarn ; and he remembered wondering, at their last interview on board, whether Evelyn would essay some stroke of stupid cunning to keep him. To be convincing, she should have prepared her effects instead of trying to stampede him : initial misgiving, then uncertainty, now blank dismay would have been more artistic than this whirlwind of emotion.

" What are you going to do about it ? " he asked.

The girl looked up in amazement, as though she had expected him to furnish a solution ; but in all negotiations Sheridan found that he saved time by letting other people set up the ninepins instead of knocking down those which he arranged.

"I . . . don't know," she faltered.

"The best thing would be for you to marry," he propounded. "A pretty girl, with money of her own and a house somewhere . . ." He was considering once again the possibilities of Geoffrey Mallock, when the telephone-bell rang. "Yes?"

The voice of Tony Rushforth, distant and nasal, was repeating monotonously: "Hullo! . . . Hullo! . . . Hullo! . . ." Then the voice quickened. "Is that Mr. Sheridan? Tony speaking. I hoped to see you again before I left, but there were so many people. . . . If you go on as you seem to intend, you must see I can't continue to act for you. I've done the straight thing in warning you at the first possible moment . . ."

Sheridan forgot his mounting irritation in vast and disabling amusement. Tony, being valiant by trunk-call, was like a terrier yapping at the heels of an elephant, from the far side of protecting bars.

"You may be sure I'm grateful," Sheridan began in ponderous irony.

"Good-bye," snapped Tony.

As he hung up the receiver, Sheridan found that Evelyn had, apparently, been talking ever since they were interrupted. He found, too, that the worldly veneer of the last six months was splintering and that the gaping general messenger, the genteel personal secretary and the pliant voluptuary had reverted to the distracted daughter of a city cashier, fearful of neighbours and hungry for bourgeois respectability. A girl of better brains or greater spirit, he reflected, would have built a career on the chance that had lifted her from the cramping drudgery of middle-class life; but Evelyn was set fast in the grip of Enfield.

"No one's going to marry me like I am now," she was whimpering.

"The man you marry will never know," he broke in.

"You've seen the great world, Evelyn There's no reason why you shouldn't make a really good match . . ."

The revolving chair, tilting gently backwards and forwards, became suddenly still. Why in the world should Tony not marry this Colthurst girl? Young Hendry had hinted that Tony was laying siege to one of the Selhursts, but a line to Orpington, invoking his patronage for Tony and damning Tony with the faintest of praise, would soon scotch that indiscretion.

Evelyn, meanwhile, had forgotten her troubles in the glamour of a "really good match". He set himself to put her conversion beyond the pale of recantation:

"All pretty women are clever so long as they don't try to talk intelligently. You're gracious if you smile enough; sympathetic if you let other people bore you; charming if you pretend to be interested. As you can't run a house, you must pay some one to run it for you; and pretend you've never had to bother about housekeeping. Don't bluff too much, though. You can say you were delicate as a child and had no proper education. You are I are old friends . . . And we *are* friends," he added with a change of voice. "I'm going to look after you. As soon as we've settled things . . ."

Putting his arm round her shoulders, Sheridan drew the girl to him. Passion was dying before they were half way across the Atlantic, he had certified its death when he broke his six months' silence to Auriol, but a chapter in the life of his child's mother would always belong to him, it would have to be bound up in his own secret autobiography.

"I'm all right now," she whispered in contrition for her earlier lamentations.

"He must be somebody I can approve of," Sheridan reminded her. "Excuse me!" he exclaimed, as the telephone-bell rang again.

This time it was Auriol Otway at the other end of the line, inviting him—at last!—to lunch with her next day.

III

On his way to Manchester Square, Sheridan considered the best mode of approaching the family which Auriol was so much afraid of hurting.

Unlike most of the men whom he met in business, Lord Otway could be neither bribed nor frightened. Candour, on the other hand, if it failed to win him, would certainly embarrass him; and, encountering his host in the hall, Sheridan asked for a moment's conversation in private.

"You remember the last time I was here . . ." he began.

"Just before you sailed," Lord Otway recalled. "I hope you feel your mission was a success."

"That will be for others to say. It has done good on personal grounds. I've had time to think." Sheridan looked up to see that the door was shut and then took up his position in front of the fire, where he could dominate the room and, in particular, the chair in which Lord Otway sat erect, closely buttoned and unyielding. For all his shyness of manner and diffidence in argument, this fellow—he decided—was going to be a tough nut to crack. He was wiry and well-trained. In spite of his London clothes, the old boy looked always as though he had arrived from the country an hour before and was returning to the country an hour later. His thin, clean-shaven face was brick-red from the end of his nose to the tips of his ears and suggested a good dinner overnight, six hours of dreamless sleep, a gallop before breakfast and a cold bath. "I told you then that my marriage had not been a success. I've decided to bring it to an end."

Lord Otway placed his hat and umbrella on the table, glancing anxiously at the clock.

"A luncheon engagement," he explained, tucking and folding himself into his overcoat as though he were applying a surgical dressing. His high collars and tight black stocks would have choked most other men; and his close-fitting frock-coat tempted inquisitive strangers to look for signs of stays. "Yes, I remember. . . . I felt then, I feel now, that it's a question only you and Mrs. Sheridan can decide."

"We have decided not to spoil each other's lives any longer. I'm telling you this because it will concern you when my present marriage is dissolved."

"For the present, then . ." Lord Otway began. "Frankly, I hope to see Auriol marrying a man nearer her in age."

"She's so much older than her age," Sheridan asserted.

"In brains, perhaps. Not in experience. When I was your age, I hadn't many illusions left, Sheridan, about life, business, politics or the honour and integrity of the men and women I met. I'd like Auriol to believe for a little longer that all her geese were swans." Lord Otway's brick-red face darkened in passing embarrassment as he looked up into Sheridan's unwavering gray eyes. "Auriol's experience of men is hardly on a par with your experience of women."

"Nor with that of any normal man."

"Of your age. That's my point."

"My marriage has been unsuccessful. Isn't it more important to consider how I shall behave in the future than how I may have behaved in the past? I am in love with Auriol; I believe she is in love with me." . . .

"Ultimately she will be the person to decide. . . . I must ask you to excuse me! I expect we shall find her in her room."

They came upon Auriol, bare-armed and swathed in an apron, arranging flowers. Sheridan fancied that she was pale, Lord Otway noticed that her hand was unsteady.

" Mr. Sheridan's here, my dear," said her father.

A sharp tinkle, following a muffled scream, rang out as the vase she was holding shivered on the floor.

" You . . . ! " Auriol began. " You startled me, daddy," she added in a quick recovery. As the colour flamed into her cheeks, Sheridan dropped on one knee and began to mop her skirt with his handkerchief. " Oh, it doesn't matter ! Please get up ! How . . . how are you ? "

Though her cheeks were still flushed, Auriol could look Sheridan in the eyes ; and her father's face set rigidly. So young, so fragile, so soft and fragrant beside this towering soldier of fortune, who stood, not speaking, hardly smiling, as though he were defying her to resist.

The tableau was resolved when Lady Otway came in, sunny, frank and universally sceptical.

" I guessed you were having it out in the smoking-room, so I didn't 'butt in', as Auriol would say," she explained. " It's always more comfortable to know where you are, isn't it ? If anybody ever does, which I doubt ; and, when you do, you're generally more uncomfortable than you were before. Well, if the papers are to be believed, you must have had a wonderful time, Mr. Sheridan. How are you ? "

" I'm very well, thank you."

" And your wife ? "

As they went in to luncheon, Sheridan wondered whether it was stupidity or malice that led Lady Otway always to enquire so pointedly about a wife whom she had never, so far as he knew, even met.

" She's as well as can be expected," he answered. "As you may imagine, it's not a very happy or comfortable time for either of us."

" You're going through with . . . this idea of yours ? "

" Surely. I think you must have seen, Lady Otway, when last we discussed this subject . . ."

"Dear Mr. Sheridan, I saw it was no affair of *mine!* I see that still. It's no use crossing the bridge till you get to the stream, is it?" she asked, as though she were defining the agreed attitude of the family. "Now we want to hear all about your travels. You went first to India and Ceylon . . . ?"

"By way of Malta and Cyprus," Sheridan interposed.

Lady Otway allowed him to tell his story in his own way while she transferred her attention to Auriol. Mr. Sheridan's personality, she felt, was impressive; his touch romantic. Though he was supposed to be telling the tale of his mission, the rich garnerings of earlier years kept bursting their doors; and at every digression into the picturesque Auriol ranged herself at his side. As he fought and climbed, slipping and picking himself up again, Auriol was no doubt fancying that she had picked herself up with him, nursing him, comforting him, sharing his triumphs. Their problems, Lady Otway felt, would be easier if in fact the child had this foundation of common endurance; but, though she could hypnotize herself now, like George the Fourth persuading himself that he had been present at the battle of Waterloo, a time would come when she realized, first, that she had not been alive at the time, then that another woman had not only been alive but present, then that this other woman had been as completely forgotten as if she had never lived. The man who could forget one wife might forget another

The Odyssey was interrupted by the butler with a message that Mr. Sheridan was wanted at the telephone.

"A penny for your thoughts, darling," said Auriol as the door closed

"I was contrasting you with Imogen and Joyce," answered Lady Otway. "If I hadn't the best evidence to the contrary, I should say you were a changeling. That's not what you mean, though, is it? . . . On the whole I like Mr. Sheridan, though perhaps I should like him better if I heard he was dead. But I realize that my little Auriol is never going to be content with the sort of man who was good enough for her sisters. . . Ah, Mr. Sheridan, no bad news, I hope?"

"It was only Willoughby," answered Sheridan with a frown. "Standish's secretary, you know."

Auriol clasped her hands and looked at him with wide-open eyes:

"What did he want? Oh, he *could* only want one thing. It's the cabinet!"

Sheridan laughed indulgently and, having got rid of the frown, tried to keep it from returning:

"We should have an even more unwieldy cabinet if a new place had to be found every time the prime minister sent for any one. I should imagine he wants to talk about my report."

"You don't really believe that."

"I certainly hope it's nothing more. If he wants me to undertake any new work before I've finished the old, I'm afraid I should have to decline."

"But you wouldn't refuse the cabinet?"

"I'm afraid I should." In spite of himself, Sheridan smiled at her strange want of understanding. "For half-a dozen reasons. It's out of the question at the present time."

IV

ON his return home that afternoon from Downing Street, Sheridan decided that by burning his boats he could at least keep his critics and advisers from arguing with him whether they should be burnt or not.

"*If*," he wrote to Livingstone, "*I did not make myself clear yesterday morning, please understand that I want you to go ahead at once.*"

So committed, he went to his wife's room with a fair expectation that she would not try again to upset his decision. For the first time since all this trouble began, he could feel—and, if necessary, declare—that something irrevocable had at last been done.

"You'll hear about it sooner or later," he began. "I may as well tell you now that Standish sent for me this afternoon."

Laura's mode of clasping her hands and looking at him with wide-open eyes reminded him of Auriol.

"To offer . . . ?"

He sat down and described the interview with careful choice of language. After congratulating him on his report, Mr. Standish had referred jocularly to the urgent advice of certain papers that a place should be found in the government for Mr. Ambrose Sheridan. What did Mr. Sheridan think of the advice? This, it could not be understood too clearly, was an informal conversation; Mr. Standish had not wasted time in taking the opinions of his colleagues until he had ascertained Mr. Sheridan's own views.

"What did you say?" asked Laura.

"Having made no offer," Sheridan answered contemptuously, "Standish told me to think it over. I told him"—an echo of Lord Otway rang opportunely—"I told him this was *really* a thing for his precious colleagues and him to decide. Whether they want me, I mean. . . . I thought I'd mention it, because I passed a news-bill on the way here with '*Mr. Sheridan at No.* 10.'"

"But was that all?"

Sheridan hesitated before answering. He could describe the second part of the interview as easily as the first, but it would involve him in a discussion and he would find himself considering, perhaps seeking, Laura's advice. With a queer instinct that collapsed under examination and reasserted itself obstinately when the examination was over, she had the power of seeing in the dark. This, however, seemed hardly the moment for him to invoke the power.

"We had a general talk," he conceded vaguely.

"Did he say anything about Lord Orpington?"

"Whether he's going to resign? I told you yesterday he isn't. I smoothed him down on Saturday."

"Did you give him the promise he wanted?"

"That I wouldn't presume to criticize him again? Likely, isn't it? I told him to put himself in my place and imagine he was responsible for a number of papers . . ."

"If you didn't give him that promise," Laura interrupted, "the smoothing down goes for nothing. He *wants* to retire . . ."

"And other people want him to retire too; and to retire at once. Notably, our friend Otway. I know all about that. If Orpington resigned to-morrow and I were offered his place next day, friend Otway thinks he'd hear no more talk of a divorce. It doesn't occur to him that, because a thing's offered, it need not necessarily be accepted. I have my hands full of *important, public* work."

Laura nodded without speaking. Disraeli had once said: "*Ask for nothing, refuse nothing, resign nothing*"; and the advice was not unsound. Ambrose could form no new alliance with liberalism or labour; and, high as he had climbed, he would never realize his dream of gathering all the old party-labels into a bonfire and leading an ideal amalgam of all parties. Political self-expression must come through the conservative party; and Mr. Standish's administration would not continue for ever. When it fell, there might be a labour interlude for half-a-dozen years; and, when the pendulum swung back again, there could hardly be a greater difference in politics than between a man who had held office and a man who had refused office.

"It would be worth your while to postpone things," she ventured at last.

He did not need to enquire what "things" she had in mind.

"And wait till I was in the cabinet before springing the mine? You all tell me I should have to resign."

"Then postpone them even longer. While you're out of office, there may be time for it to be forgotten. Ambrose, I *know* I'm right! It's another trap."

"I doubt if Standish would make me colonial secretary straight away in any event. He certainly wouldn't do it to help Otway on with a little family intrigue."

"No, Mr. Standish isn't bothering about that He wants to stop your mouth. We've seen it again and again! When a critic becomes too troublesome, you make him share responsibility for everything he's been criticizing. If you postponed things . ."

She broke off and sat staring out of the window again.

"I've burnt my boats, quite deliberately," said Sheridan. "I always realized that I might have to wait for a time. That was one reason, you may remember, why I didn't want to waste an entirely unnecessary six months," he continued resentfully "If we could have got this over while I was still abroad." . . .

"I hoped there'd be nothing to get over. If Lord Orpington *does* resign, you can't afford to refuse. This is your tide, you must catch it. Ambrose, you *must* be patient . . ."

He shook his head. Seven months before she had advised him to be patient; and he had missed his tide. If once he listened to reasons for postponement, they would be manufactured anew every week; and she must have forgotten the fierce urge of love to suggest it.

"Too late to think of things like that," he answered abruptly. "If I must wait, I must." A memory of his late successes came to comfort him. "I think you'll find, when the struggle begins . . . I'm more confident than you are. Until he meets it, Standish won't realize what he's up against. *I* shan't say anything, I shall leave it to others. I said nothing yesterday when Livingstone told me that I should have the church and the court and god-knows-what all on my back. He left out the people. The people whom I represent, the people from whom I sprang."

Laura looked at her watch without attempting to answer. When he was in one of his arrogant moods, opposition only inflated his arrogance. Until the mood passed, he would not see that he was throwing away the cardinal opportunity of his political life. And there was no one else to see it for him, now that Mr. Livingstone had been overwhelmed. He had no other friends. This Otway child probably mistook recklessness for courage and arrogance for strength.

Still looking at her watch, Laura slowly realized that she had made up her mind to save him and was trying to calculate whether she had time to begin before dinner. Though she had never met Auriol, she was convinced that the girl would listen to reason. It was only a postponement she was trying to achieve. In her interest as much as in his; in the interest of any one that cared for Ambrose or believed in him.

"Don't accept anything or refuse anything without telling me," she begged.

"Nothing's been offered me yet."

As soon as she was alone, Laura put on her hat and slipped out of the house. She had hailed a taxi before she remembered that she did not know Lord Otway's number; and, rather than risk a meeting with Ambrose, she drove first to her club and hunted for the address in a telephone-directory. Manchester Square. As she got into the taxi again, she found that she was trembling from head to foot. This encounter would be unbearable; and yet she must bear it. If the girl had the mercilessness of youth, she must surely have also the forbearance of breeding. Ambrose would never forgive them if he learned that they were conspiring to save him; but that could not be helped. The girl would not refuse to see her?

Half-way to Manchester Square, Laura stopped the taxi and began to walk home. Then, in furious self-scorn, she hailed another. Her courage ebbed to a compromise; if Miss Otway were not at home, she would accept this as an augury. Then she tried to make her mind a blank in the hope of steadying her nerves. "*Not at home.*" "*Engaged for the moment, madam.*" "*Away from town*": if only the girl were not at home. . . .

Laura opened her eyes at the scraping of the taxi against the kerb. This was the square, the house; and on the steps stood the girl.

V

"Miss Otway?" Though she had never seen her before, Mrs. Sheridan recognized the forehead, nose and mouth from photographs in the illustrated papers. "Can you spare me a few minutes?"

"Yes, of course." As she opened the door and stood aside, Auriol looked at her visitor's face; but the head was bent under a low hat. "Come into my room if you don't mind a muddle. Let me see . . . ?"

As she paused interrogatively, Laura swayed and caught at the back of a chair.

"I'm . . . I'm all right," she told Auriol. "I've been sleeping so badly. I wanted to see you about . . . I think you know Ambrose Sheridan . . ."

"But, excuse me . . . ?" Auriol began.

"Oh, I haven't told you! I'm his wife."

"His . . . ? Oh!"

For several minutes neither spoke. As though they were at the end of their contest instead of the beginning, both were breathing quickly; and Laura could see the blood throbbing in Auriol's neck, mantling her cheeks and rising painfully to her head.

"You must think it strange of me to force my way in like this," she murmured. "I hardly know where to begin. I want to say . . He simply can't afford a scandal at the present time. You *must* be in love with him or you wouldn't be doing this. I . . . well, he's everything to me. Can't you . . . postpone things? If you don't, you'll cost him the cabinet."

"He says he wouldn't take the cabinet if it were offered him," Auriol answered.

"He can't afford to refuse it. His position will never be as high again. Opportunities don't wait for you in politics; there will be younger men coming on."

"In two years the government won't be able to get on without him. Less than two years."

The words were confident enough, but the voice was that of an eager child declaiming some one else's dramatic speech.

"I thought, if we could have a little talk . " Laura began. "You've not known him very long . . ."

"We've had six months to think it over," Auriol sighed.

"I've had twenty years, to think over *him*, to think what marriage means . . ."

"And isn't that enough?"

"I don't follow," said Laura, though the purport of the question was clear enough. After twenty years of failure, a crushed and faded woman could not want to stand longer in her husband's way. "How old are you?" she asked.

"Twenty-two. Please don't say I'm too young . . ."

"I was your age when I met him first! And he was two years younger. . . . I was thinking what a sweet little thing you looked. And I adore bright colours. . . . You give him your youth, certainly . . ."

Her tone sounded disparaging; and Auriol's cheeks warmed.

"I give him myself," she answered. "I can't give more."

"You give yourself to be loved, not to be . . . hurt. You're not *sacrificing* anything; and I feel—I'm seeing it for the first time—I feel you can only stick to people when you've given them your heart's blood and made them worth while. Every woman is fonder of the delicate children who wear her out to keep them alive. Miss Otway . . ." She bit her lips and fell silent.

With a movement that was hardly seen, Auriol came to her side and knelt by her chair:

"This is so dreadful for you!"

"Miss Otway, I gave up my chance of having children for him, though I knew at the time we should need them to keep us together. If you rob him of his career, he'll reproach you afterwards as he has reproached me. Nothing's ever his fault. . . . That wasn't what I meant to say, though. If you would make a sacrifice for him . . ."

"I will make any sacrifice he asks."

"Then . . . No!" Laura dragged herself from the chair as though the girl's proximity were numbing her. "If I say I believe all he tells you—that he can't work without you and the rest—won't you believe *any* one who tells you that you're ruining him? Ask Lord Orpington, who's in the place that Ambrose wants to fill! Ask Mr. Standish himself!"

"He can't hope for office till things have been forgotten," Auriol conceded.

"And he mustn't refuse office when the chance comes! You can make him or break him. Can't you take off your spell before it's too late? Go away!"

"If I went away, he'd go away too . . . out of England, parliament, public life. It's better that he should wait a year or two than disappear altogether. It's better . . ."

"You realize it won't go on for ever?" interrupted Laura. "One wife was never enough for him. Miss Otway . . ." She turned with desperate resolution: "Miss Otway, if he needs you, if you *mean* you'll do anything for him, you should give yourself to him. You won't spoil his career then. You won't spoil your two lives, for you can part quietly when you're tired of each other."

"You mean . . " Auriol hesitated to be sure she had heard aright. "You mean I'm to be his mistress?"

"That shocks you? How is it worse than urging me to divorce him so that he can marry you?"

"I'm afraid I can't discuss it with you. I couldn't refuse to see you when you came . . ."

Laura interrupted her by moving towards the door. Half way across the room, she checked and held out her hand:

"I didn't mean to shock you . . ."

Auriol bit her lip in shame at having lost control of herself before a stranger:

"It was silly of me. I was startled. I know people *do* do these things . . ."

Without seeming to hurry, she reached the door and opened it. Laura passed out thankfully. The interview, hard to begin, was harder to end. This girl, in her own way, was more difficult to move than Ambrose. Warnings, entreaties shivered against her young assurance. And yet the entreaties should have been turned round the other way! As Tony, as Max reminded her, there could be no divorce if one spiritless woman would only have the courage of her convictions.

"What will you do if I can't bring myself to institute proceedings?" asked Laura, as they came into the hall.

"I shall begin to doubt that you're thinking of Ambrose very much."

"You might both live to thank me! When the first glamour is over, will you have the patience to live with your great man ? When he's sixty, will you be thinking of younger men ? It's not so long since you thought you were in love with Max Hendry."

Auriol's fair skin flushed angrily at the name.

"We were children!" she exclaimed impatiently

Forcing a smile, Laura held out her hand again:

"Are you much more than a child yet ? I'm wondering whether you're really in love with Ambrose, whether you understand the *meaning* of love . . ."

"Because I'm not obsessed by sex ?" Auriol demanded contemptuously. "Of course, if you've decided to stand in our way . . ."

"I've decided nothing," Laura answered brokenly. "Will you promise me something ? You've been very sweet and patient with me ; I want to be friends. If you marry Ambrose, you won't have an easy time, but perhaps I may be able to help you. Promise that you'll come to me if you ever think I can help you. I've not made such a success that I'm a good advertisement, but one never knows."

"I'll promise you that," Auriol answered.

"I shan't feel he's so far away, if I have you."

CHAPTER V

Nicias to Cleon

> ". . . Select your lord
> By the direct employment of your brains
> As best you may,—bad as the blunder prove,
> A far worse evil stank beneath the sun
> When some legitimate blockhead managed so
> Matters that high time was to interfere,
> Though interference came from hell itself
> And not the blind mad miserable mob
> Happily ruled so long by pillow-luck
> And divine right,—by lies in short, not truth."
>
> ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society.*

I

AS soon as he could leave London, Max went to his father's house at Newmarket, only returning in time for Lord Orpington's dinner to the Trade Commission.

"I'm leavin' Sheridan," he announced in a tone that did not encourage Sir Mark to ask for explanations. "D'you think any of your rich friends could find me a job? Out of England, with a chance of some scrappin', for choice. A little more of this private-secretary stunt and you'll find me arrangin' flowers in the mornin' and workin' pink butterflies on my pyjamas in the afternoon."

Sir Mark, who was the son and grandson, as well as the father, of an only son, addressed himself with a certain resentment to a problem which he felt should not have arisen. If the government had refrained from taxing luckless landlords out of existence for the last thirty years, Max would not have been obliged to hunt for employment in competition with men who, truth to tell, were technically better qualified.

" There must be openings," he answered optimistically.

" They shut up like oysters when they hear me comin'," said Max. " I don't care how far I go or how fever-stricken the place may be . . ."

In his own phrase, Max and Auriol had been trained too long in the same stable; and, if he remained in England, he would always be meeting her. There must surely, in this endless empire, be mounted rifles or frontier police to take in a man who only wanted to escape an obsession that was driving him mad? When he ran from his chambers rather than listen to Auriol's voice on the telephone, he had sworn that he would hold no communication with her; but vows and resolutions were alike powerless to keep him from thinking of her. Two telephone-messages in London had begged him to arrange a meeting; three notes to Newmarket had demanded that he should give her an opportunity of "explaining things" There was nothing, Max knew, that she could explain; and it would be time enough for them to meet when she told him that she had made a mistake. If she were in love herself, she would understand what it meant for him to be in love with her.

"Are you wise to leave Sheridan at this moment?" asked Sir Mark. " I was lunching with Peter Orpington at the Jockey Club rooms; and he talked as if he meant to give up. I asked who would succeed him; and he seemed to think it would be Sheridan It's a mistake to leave a stable when its luck is in."

" I shall clear out of this perishin' country if I have to swim," Max answered

" If I hear of anything . . ." began his father.

He had heard of nothing by the end of the meeting; and Max, who was by now well-used to the convention that he was hopeless, realized that any position he aspired to fill must be won by his own efforts.

" I don't insist on a job if I can make sure of the scrappin'," he muttered, as he fought his way through a cluster of opulent book-makers at the station. One of them trod on his foot to keep him from reaching the sole unoccupied corner-seat; and he retaliated with a well-directed kick. Two more closed in; and he gave himself the pleasure of fending them with elbow-thrusts that sent them crowing for breath into the arms of a policeman and a guard. Then, to mark his dislike of their company, he chose a different compartment. "Even that was something. If Sheridan had been among that lot . I'm going to sleep."

II

HE was composing himself when the door opened; and, as he scrutinized his neighbours' faces, Max decided that, if he did not wake to find his pocket picked, he would be roused to find his throat being cut

"Talk about happy half-hours with the criminal classes!" he muttered. Of the six men in the carriage only one even looked respectable. "Though that may be his cunnin'," Max felt. "If you have white mutton-chop whiskers and look like the old family-butler in some one's advertisement for huntin'-port, you can get away with it as a tie-pin sharp every day of your life. The others are murderers from the word 'go'"

He was buttoning his note-case into its pocket when the nearest of the presumed cut-throats invited him to beguile the journey with a game of cards.

"Afraid I don't play," Max answered. Then he caught a twinkle in the eyes of the neighbour whom he had classified variously as a butler and a tie-pin thief. "At least," he added in an undertone, "not in a race-train with strangers."

"It all depends on your game," answered his neighbour. "You remember Captain Blood? Ah, you should read your *Modern Traveller*. '*He very rarely touched a card*' . . ."

They were interrupted by a second of their suspect companions, who leaned across to ask if the old gentleman would care to take a hand.

To Max's surprise, the invitation was accepted with alacrity :

" That is, if you really want me. I was explaining to this gentleman that, like the celebrated Captain Blood, I very rarely touch a card ; but, when I do, I . . . always enjoy it. You prefer to watch ? " the old gentleman added to Max. " Perhaps you'll come in later."

While the others made a table out of a carriage-cushion, Max sat forward where he could see four hands. This was better than anything he had expected ; and, with reasonable luck, he conld count on that altercation which he required to clear his head. Five of the six players were of a type that he had met before ; but of the old man who likened himself enigmatically to " Captain Blood ", Max hardly knew what to make.

" Either he's goin' to be rooked," he decided ; " or they'll use him to decoy me. He's goin' to be rooked," he added, as the cards were shuffled and dealt with a certain professional ease.

For the first half-hour the play was quiet and the betting low. Then flasks were produced ; the old gentleman took a pull and accepted a cigar ; every one warmed to the game. So far as an outsider could see, however, there was nothing to arouse suspicion : the old gentleman was allowed his share of winning hands ; no one tried to force the game ; and Max returned to his paper before any one could suggest that he should join in.

He abandoned it half-an-hour later when an angry voice cut through the mutter of the play to demand :

" Here, who the hell are you ? "

Five of the six players were staring at a straight flush which the old gentleman exhibited with a smile of quiet triumph ; two of them were on their feet ; a third was waving a mottled fist under the dealer's nose.

" I *beg* your pardon ? " said the old gentleman in artistic amazement.

Max noticed a rich pool of dog's-eared treasury notes, observing with surprise that the protesting players were too much excited to claim their share until they had settled accounts with their white-whiskered opponent.

" Who the hell are you ? " repeated the angry voice.

" My name is Caldwell. And your manner is offensive, sir. If I have a card . . ." In standing up, the old gentleman contrived to rake the pool to his side and slipped the notes, with a careless rustle, into his trouser-pocket. As he stepped back towards Max's corner, his voice lost its artificial surprise and resentment. " I'm afraid I have no cards with me. *So* sorry. You'll find me in the telephone-book, though : Arthur Caldwell ; Upper Brook Street If this finishes the game, I have to thank you for your courtesy in letting me take a hand. May I borrow that pack a moment ? Thank you ! " He turned to Max and held out the cards in a hand that appeared not to move. " The bottom card is the queen of spades. At least . . *is* it ? It seems to have become the nine of diamonds. No ! The four of clubs ! No, the ten of hearts. The quickness of the hand, in the old phrase, deceives the eye. You are quite sure that is the ten of diamonds ? Believe me, sir, you are mistaken : it is the joker ! Or one of them." He threw down the cards and leant against the side of the door. " You are quite right, sir," he told Max, " about not playing with strangers. It was when the second joker appeared that my naturally unsuspicious mind was disquieted."

By now the other players were all on their feet, swaying easily with the movement of the train. Though they seemed at first sight to be bunched clumsily, Max detected signs of discipline which suggested that they were not unfamiliar with brawling in confined spaces. In the time needed to restore the cushion to its place, he reviewed the strength of the opposing forces: they were five to one; and, though the old gentleman shewed no sign of fear, he would be overpowered almost before he could pull the communication-cord. It would be five to one again, when the guard came to the door: five injured innocents protesting that they had been cheated.

Max decided that the conflict must be localized.

"What's happened?" he asked, bending forward till he was screening one half of Mr. Caldwell's body.

Five voices answered him at once:

"Bloody crook, that's what he is!"

Under cover of the tumult Max found time to ask:

"Are you the Mr. Caldwell, sir, who leased two fillies to my father after the December sales last year? My name's Hendry. Ah! I thought you must be." Then he held up his hand for silence. "Tell me what happened . . ." The memory of an affray in Soho, during the war, returned to him; and he folded his paper, as he talked, into halves, quarters and eighths; then he rolled it into a tight baton and gripped it in the middle. "You gentlemen were playin' . . . poker, was it? I see. What was it you said about a second joker, sir?" he appealed to Mr. Caldwell in convincing perplexity.

"That was more than I could bear," said the old gentleman. "An insult to one's intelligence, don't you think? I'm rusty, of course, but that single-handed palming I shewed you was not too bad, for an amateur? And I am *only* an amateur, though they have done me the honour to think me a professional, the leader of a rival gang. Hence their zeal to know who the hell I was! They know now; and they can testify that I gave myself a full house, fours and a straight flush in three consecutive deals. I'm surprised you don't know your *Modern Traveller*, Hendry: '*He very rarely touched a card, but when he did he cheated*' . . . Keep your distance, gentlemen, if you please! You haven't yet heard what I propose to do.

As I have accepted your hospitality to the extent of some brandy and a really first-rate cigar, I shall not carry matters farther. My winnings, however, I shall keep, at least until I can hand them over to the orphanage associated with this railway. As I cannot hope that the rest of our journey will be altogether free from embarrassment, I suggest that you transfer yourselves . . . Ah, would you? Stand clear, Hendry!"

III

An attempted rush from the other end of the carriage wavered and stopped as Mr. Caldwell unshipped his race-glasses and swung them from the end of their strap.

"Two can play at that," murmured one of his antagonists. "Clear out of the way, you, sir!" he shouted to Max.

"How can I clear out in a place like this?" Max returned.

"If you don't want your head broken . . ."

"The first man who touches me goes through that window!"

"Oo, let him have it!"

There was a moment's silence before the first blow was struck; and Max heard Mr. Caldwell's voice, clear and frosty behind him, enquiring if he knew his Kipling:

"What are the lines? '*For it was:—" Belts, belts, belts, an' that's one for you!"*' . . ."

Then a heavy case swung down at the end of a shortened strap. Max caught it on his left forearm and sprang forward to clinch. Gripping his baton in his right hand, he jabbed upwards; the paper, tightly rolled and hard as wood, caught his assailant under the chin. Above the noise of the train came a sharp click; and a limp body collapsed insensible against the knees of the second rank.

"Any one else want anything?" Max enquired invitingly.

"A useful trick that," observed Mr. Caldwell. "I saw it once in Valparaiso, but the papers there are on the flimsy side. Are you doing anything to-night? I should so much like you to dine with me."

"Afraid I'm dinin' at the House of Commons, sir, of all ungodly places. Any other night . . ."

"Choose your own! I'm deeply indebted to you, though it was a shame to drag you into my troubles. Still, I welcome any chance of meeting a man who can keep his head. Tell me about yourself! Are you a great racing-man, like your father?"

"Only between whiles, sir. Professionally, I'm one of the unemployed."

"A victim of the war? I wonder if I can find you a job."

"I should be much obliged. . . . Look out! He's coming to, sir!"

"*They* aren't going to fight," said Mr. Caldwell contemptuously.

With the same level tranquillity that he had displayed in manipulating the cards and in defying his assailants, the old gentleman crooked the handle of his umbrella round the communication-cord and strapped his field-glasses into place. Max, with greater caution or lesser knowledge of a beaten enemy, remained standing, home-made truncheon in hand, while the single casualty of their brief war was lifted on to a seat.

"Are you goin' to behave yourselves?" he demanded, as the others began to whisper among themselves.

A hot-spring of obscenity gushed forth at the question.

"They'll be all right if you don't bait them," said Mr. Caldwell. "'*Back to back, and facing outward*' . . . You remember Kipling on the Anglo-Saxon who *won't* lose his temper? . . . I don't know whether you've heard of Patterson and Mackenzie: we're general merchants on the west coast of South America, with some pretty big nitrate interests. Lonely life; a month from England; roughish lot to work with; and every temptation to drink yourself to death. If you're proof against all that . . ."

"My God," Max ejaculated, with shining eyes.

Though Mr. Caldwell repeated at intervals that Max must now tell him all about himself, he continued to talk almost without ceasing until the train drew in to the terminus and all five conspirators jumped out.

"I'm not a vindictive man," he explained, "but I've been saving up my revenge ever since I was swindled by another lot of these gentry eight-and-forty years ago. I was an undergraduate of Jesus at the time; and I couldn't afford to lose money to any one. Now I'm at peace with the world. You'll dine to-morrow, you say? I'm in earnest about that job. If you don't mind leaving England . . ."

"I wouldn't stay in this home for heroes if you paid me, sir."

"Ah, you shouldn't say that! You should say you'll leave England to please the directors if they will make it worth your while. Well, they will. There's a peculiarly tough and detestable group of men at our branch in Arica; and I have a feeling that you're the man to lick them into shape. You should lose no time in learning Spanish; and, when you get out there, make a rule never to drink till sundown. Good-bye."

A moment later Max was alone, with a tightly rolled morning paper still gripped in his hand. On reaching his rooms, he tracked his new friend to his niche in *Who's Who*. Patterson and Mackenzie could afford to establish their directors at three addresses and enabled them to run racing-stables in their spare time.

"I'm not a vindictive man either," said Max. "All the same, if I got the chance . . ."

As he dressed and drove down to the House of Commons, it was more than pleasant to rehearse imaginary scenes of triumph with Auriol and Sheridan. While Sir Mark, while Auriol and the rest were politely disparaging, he had proved that he could be taken on his merits. In two or three years' time—who could say?—the directors of Patterson and Mackenzie might be entertaining their manager from Arica to a dinner like this one. Max saw himself, bronzed and lean, half Spanish and wholly a leader of men, receiving the thanks of the board. Auriol would be sorry then. It would be too late, but she would be sorry.

And perhaps, after all, it would not be too late: he could not, would not believe that she was going to throw herself away on a vulgar, treacherous bully old enough to be her father.

His mood of truculence kept Max company until he reached the Houses of Parliament. It was driven out by a disabling sense of helplessness and insignificance. The velvet night, the powdered sky, the sooty buildings were all so vast; the colossal statues of the departed great seemed to frown on the pettiness of his triumphs and sorrows. The atmosphere, as ever, was charged with subdued excitement, as though one more new era in the government of man by man was to be born that night.

Then he forgot everything in numbing confusion, as he caught sight of Auriol advancing rapidly towards him between her parents

"I was hoping for this!" she cried. "Max dear, I've been trying for days to get hold of you . . ."

"I was stayin' with my father," he answered coldly, edging from her side to shake hands with Lady Otway.

Auriol followed him.

"Oh?" She seemed faintly piqued to find that a broken heart could be taken racing. "I telephoned the day after I dined with you. I was so miserable to think you were unhappy, Max. I said we must part friends . . ."

"You're goin' through with this business?" he interrupted, turning to face her for the first time.

Auriol nodded and then lowered her eyes:

"Yes. I can't look forward to a very happy time for the next year. If I felt I always had your friendship . . ."

"Afraid my friendship won't be much use to you. I'm goin' abroad."

"Oh, Max, where?"

"I mustn't say at present. . . . I shan't see you again, so I'll say 'good-bye and good luck' now. . . . These people are late."

"No, we're early. I came on purpose to get you to myself for a moment. I might have saved myself the trouble."

IV

Max turned with a shrug and shook hands with Lord Otway. Unless their host intended to announce his widely rumoured resignation, he could not understand why people who only wished to see Sheridan dead should attend a dinner in his honour.

"Afraid this won't be a patch on my 'saviours of society' affair," said Geoffrey Mallock.

"It follows from it," said Max.

The admirals and generals, the ministers and officials, the writers and preachers, the bankers and newspaper-proprietors who had tried to "save society" were now absent. Ambrose Sheridan, who had been sent to solve a problem that had defeated liberal, coalition, conservative and labour governments, was returned, full of energy and confidence, to harass the administration that had tried to get rid of him.

"We couldn't drown him, you see," said Geoffrey.

"Well for me you didn't," said Lord Otway with an uneasy smile. "It was on my suggestion that the prime minister asked him to undertake this mission."

"Was it on your suggestion the P.M. offered him a place in the cabinet?" asked Auriol.

"I didn't know the offer had been made, though I've felt and said for a long time that he would strengthen the government. Do you feel this tour has done good, Geoffrey?"

Mallock smiled maliciously.

"To this country? Or the empire? Or to himself? He's convinced our brothers-beyond-the-seas that he's the one man who understands them. He's convinced people here that he's the one man with a vision and a policy. The general conditions in England are much better than when we went away; and he'll convince people that the improvement is due to him. Undoubtedly he's done good . . . to himself. He's England's strong man. '*They tried to get rid of me too.*' This is the moment for his *coup*. And this is the moment when Max and I, who have served him so faithfully . . ."

"I'm leavin' him," Max interrupted.

"On the eve of the share-out? Why?"

"I'm sick of this country."

"It's still the best country to loot."

"I'm sick of the political gang. . . . Hullo! They're off!"

Led by a queer, anachronistic figure in a blue dress-coat with white facings and a broad tie wound twice round his collar, they descended to a private dining-room. When his turn came, Max shook Lord Orpington's hand with the sympathy of one who had fallen by similar methods to the same antagonist. Though it was easy to laugh at "Blue Peter", it was impossible to dislike him; and in a few years the species would be extinct. Pink-faced, blue-eyed and bald, Lord Orpington might have sat—Max fancied—for a study of Humpty Dumpty in old age. Public life would be the poorer when the Orpingtons and Otways and Killarneys withdrew at the elbowing of a "political gang" which believed, as Geoffrey Mallock declared openly, that England was still the best country to loot

"All the same," Max decided, as he hunted for his place, "knowin' the two of them, I should have said at the start there was no chance for Blue Peter if they met at level weights."

In a party with three men for every woman—for the most part men of age and position—the secretaries were collected together in remote obscurity; and Max tried to keep himself from looking at Auriol by studying the conversations that arose in front and on either side of him.

The Selhurst girls, partnered by distinguished parliamentarians unversed in field-sports, were propounding spasmodic questions about plays which neither side had seen. Officials exchanged esoteric confidences, whenever possible, with other officials, creating oases of silence at either side. Tony Rushforth was making the most of his opportunities with Evelyn Colthurst. Dazed and half deafened, Laura Sheridan was trying to concentrate her attention on Lord Orpington's inexhaustible anecdotes.

Was she, Max wondered, reflecting that for her too this would be the last public dinner she would ever attend? Was she trying, like him, to imagine what all these people would say when the thunderbolt fell? Or was she trying to make up her mind what to do next? During his brief holiday at Newmarket, she had not been allowed to leave her rack: Tony and Lord Otway on one side, Sheridan and Auriol on the other had been importuning her alternately until she answered them finally, in a formula which expressed more pride than she felt, that she would keep no man tied to her against his will but that she compelled no one to marry or remarry by setting her husband free. "*And now*," she had continued, after writing to tell Max of her decision, "*I must get used to things*."

Robbed of her home, her husband, her prestige as his wife, what in the world could she do with herself?

This was the last dinner of its kind that Lady Orpington or the Selhurst girls would be constrained to attend; but, though they might not like the manner of their going, Max felt that they should be grateful to Sheridan for compelling them to go. They had no bent for the life of eternal competition and struggle at which the "political gang" excelled. "Blue Peter" was no match for a man who combined in his own person the flexibility and resource of the politician, the journalist and the business-man, with the cunning of a lawyer and the enthusiasm of a priest.

As the dinner drew to a close, Max fancied that he could detect a note of expectancy, perhaps of uneasiness, in the conversations around him. The members of the mission, presumably, were wondering whether they would be mentioned by name; the Otways, the Sheridans, he himself were waiting to hear if Orpington would say anything about resigning. Lord Orpington, audibly exhorting the waiters to "get a move on", clearly wanted to say what he had to say and get it over. The conversations, like a line of sailing-ships on the far edge of a breeze, became suddenly becalmed. Without waiting for the plates to be removed, Lord Orpington sent the wine round and stood up:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the king!"

A sigh of relief ran round the tables.

"The king!"

"The king!"

"The king, God bless him!"

The toast was followed by a long silence faintly punctuated by the scrape of matches. Then Lord Orpington stood up to propose the health of his principal guest. From ill-defined sympathy, Max applauded the speaker; from loyalty to an undefined code of his own, he patted the table at every tribute to Sheridan's qualities and achievements; for the rest, until Auriol's face hurt him with its radiance, he watched for a change of expression among the other members of the audience. "You have all no doubt read the summary of Mr. Sheridan's report which was published in the press last week. I shall therefore not delay the proceedings by discussing it." Max was in time to see a shadow passing over Laura's wan face: though her husband was dead to her, she could still finger his medals. "I was privileged to wish Mr. Sheridan god-speed. It is a greater privilege to bid him welcome back, though he and I, thanks to the vigilance of his press, have not lost touch with each other for a day." The faces of the Selhurst girls, Max noted, were growing rigid; Sheridan was smiling; Lord Otway was staring at his plate. "I suppose I shall be 'picturesque' so long as admirals are 'breezy'." Max heard a ripple of laughter, set in motion by relief that Orpington was taking the attacks on himself in good part. Was that not the only course for a gentleman when he met with foul fighting: to bow and retire, with a smile, from the ring? Max thanked heaven that with Auriol, when she tried to explain, with Laura, when she wanted to sympathize, and with Sheridan, when he tendered a cash compensation, he had preserved his dignity and his temper. At this time to-morrow night he would be exploring the mysteries of nitrate with Mr. Caldwell. . . .

"I feel the more fortunate to be entertaining Mr. Sheridan to-night," continued Lord Orpington, "in that this is probably the last time I shall have the honour of appearing as one of his majesty's ministers." In the pause that followed, every lank body stiffened. "I am not as young as I was nor as leisured as I should like to be. In a fairly long political career I have many times heard that this man or that is intriguing for office or clinging to it. For myself, I can only say that, if you offered me the choice between twelve months as one of his majesty's secretaries of state and twelve months as one of his majesty's guests in one of his majesty's prisons, I should not hesitate to elect prison, with or without hard labour. This, however, is a digression. It is my pleasure and privilege to-night, since Mr. Sheridan and I have not always agreed on the ethics of popular journalism, to range myself with a press which is almost unanimous in demanding how long the government will be content to accept Mr. Sheridan's services without admitting him to its counsels. His career has been such that it is too late to wish him success; but I ask you to rise and drink to his even greater success in supporting the onerous responsibilities and maintaining the high traditions of our public life. Mr. Sheridan!"

Amid a scrape of chairs and scuffle of feet, a cry of "Mr. Sheridan", "Mr. Sheridan", "Mr. Sheridan" ran round the table.

"Among the things that might have been expressed differently," Geoffrey Mallock whispered to Max, "I include the toast of 'greater success in maintaining the high traditions of our public life'."

V

As he waited for Sheridan to return thanks, Max studied the faces about him, this time to discover how many of his neighbours had been let into the secret of Lord Orpington's impending resignation. Doyle knew, but not Mallock; Lord Otway, but not Auriol; the Selhursts, naturally, but not Sheridan himself who no less naturally would have been expected to know.

The announcement seemed to have upset his speech; and Max saw him writing rapidly on the back of his *menu* until Lord Orpington leaned over to ask if he was ready. The abrupt silence that greeted his opening words seemed to disconcert him; and, as he recapitulated the task that had been entrusted to him, he seemed to be gaining himself time to think of a new peroration. The audience listened patiently in the hope of hearing an announcement of interest equal to Lord Orpington's hint of resignation. Instead, Sheridan stated his ideal of Empire; and, though Auriol sat forward with her chin in her hands, drinking in his words, the rest were vaguely disappointed. Most of them had expected something different; many had heard this same speech before; and usually it had been delivered with more passionate conviction and in more compelling language.

"An anticlimax, this," Geoffrey whispered. "And I wrote him such a moving little oration, too."

Max silenced him with a gesture and listened curiously. Sheridan was hesitating for words and referring more and more often to the notes on his *menu* until the attention of the audience began to wander. Then, abruptly, he straightened himself and smiled; his tone—like Lord Orpington's—became conversational and jocular, as though both men were playing a game of make-believe and, recollecting that they were still accounted friends, were buttoning their foils and crossing swords with an air of careless jesting.

"I have thanked you," Sheridan continued, "on behalf of my colleagues and myself. It remains for me to express a hope—on behalf of myself and of them and of the public at large—that we are not to take seriously your lordship's threat of resignation. Failing health alone would justify such a course; and I doubt whether failing health, of which happily we see no signs, would avail against the demand—the unanimous and not the 'almost unanimous' demand of the press, the unanimous demand of the people and not merely of the press or of the 'ignorant masses', the demand of the people throughout this empire and not only in these islands—that men of your lordship's experience, in your lordship's position, shall continue to support the responsibilities which your predecessors never shrank from shouldering and shall continue to maintain the traditions of public life which they first shaped."

The applause that followed only died down when it was observed that the speaker had not finished.

"Your lordship has stated that we have not always seen eye to eye on the ethics of popular journalism. It would be insincere for me to pretend I did not know that you have been criticized in papers for which I accept absolute responsibility. Criticism," Sheridan concluded, with his eyes turned to a corner of the ceiling, "is the price that every man pays for the privilege of serving his country. Crucifixion, literal or metaphorical, is the price required of every one who tries to serve humanity I have perhaps been attacked rather more than most men, in a greater number of countries, by a wider variety of critics. This should have hardened my heart or toughened my skin, but it has done neither. Caricatures of your lordship as a blend of Beau Brummel and Fred Archer can hardly be more galling than caricatures of me as a blend of the Great Napoleon and Jack the Ripper. You cannot be more weary of hearing about your picturesque personality than I of being told that I have 'the Napoleon touch', especially as that touch seems to be compounded of Napoleon's less agreeable characteristics. If I humbly share his love for efficiency, I hope the ladies and gentlemen here to-night who have been my colleagues for the last six months will not maintain that I have shewn any of Napoleon's ruthlessness, unscrupulousness or heartlessness. Criticism is never pleasant to receive ; and it is seldom pleasant to administer when one has outgrown the universal delight of the human boy with his first pot of ink. It will be no consolation for you to know that my motives have been as much travestied as your own : you are charged, I gather, with clinging to office, I am supposed to be undermining your position with a view to occupying it myself. This supposition ignores three important factors: I hope, as I have said, that you do not seriously contemplate resignation; I doubt greatly whether, in the event of your resigning, the prime minister would invite me to take your place; and I know—conjectures and aspirations end here—I *know* that I could not entertain such an offer at the present time. Any success that I have had in private business or public affairs must be ascribed to concentration. My mission, which this dinner sees resolved into its elements, went out with an agenda and has come back with a policy. Until that policy has been adopted by the present or by some future government, from pressure within or without, as the business of a minister or the dream of a private member, I am not interested in the shuffling of individual offices nor in the fate of individual administrations."

This time there was no opportunity for discussion of the speech. After a brief interval of applause, Lord Orpington walked round the table and suggested to Sheridan that the party should make signs of breaking up.

"No need for *us* to go yet," he added, "but some of these people live out of London. Well, that was a capital speech. First-rate."

"I wish you hadn't even mentioned resignation," said Sheridan. "If I'm as young as you are when I'm your age . . ."

"That was for the public. I refuse to be shot at, day in, day out, for doing my poor best in a job I've always hated. You can give me no undertaking that the attacks will stop. I bow to my critics. You can tell that to your editors, with my compliments."

Sheridan frowned at the unexpected directness of this attack. He began to say that other papers had been more outspoken than his own; but Lord Orpington, freed of responsibilities by his late declaration, refused to be serious.

"You're teaching the press," Sheridan substituted, "that it can criticize a man out of office."

"I'm not *trying* to teach anybody *anything*. I'm not competent to. I regard my general ability as very moderate. By the way, you wrote to me about Tony Rushforth. If I were staying on, I'd try to find him a place in the secretariat, but it wouldn't be fair to tie my successor's hands with an eleventh-hour job."

"I'm obliged to you for even thinking of it. I didn't want him to go; and, if he cares to come back, I daresay I can make a billet for him. Excuse me a moment!" Sheridan crossed the room to Rushforth's side. "I promised Miss Colthurst that I'd find some one to take her home. I must get back to work. Would you mind undertaking it? Her house is in Surrey, but she's staying the night in some hotel hereabouts."

"Is that the girl I was sitting next to?" asked Tony. "All right. I shall want to have a talk with you, Ambrose, later. I don't know whether what Orpington said to-night is going to alter things . . ."

"It isn't," Sheridan answered, turning on his heel.

EPILOGUE

" . . . Where one ceases to soliloquize,
Somehow the motives, that did well enough
I' the darkness, when you bring them into light
Are found, like those famed cave-fish, to lack eye
And organ for the upper magnitudes."

ROBERT BROWNING: *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society.*

I

IN Fleet Street that night, it was agreed that Ambrose Sheridan might have been trusted to make history even out of a royal commission.

Mr. Sheridan's editors were holding their papers open till the last possible moment on the chance of receiving a message; but, as one man after another came up to say good-bye, Sheridan instructed Max to warn his people that he was going home as soon as he could get away.

" If my car's there," he added as a hint.

After a slow start, the dining-room emptied rapidly Walking through the Speaker's Court, Max heard a sound of subdued altercation between the Otways, ending when Auriol whispered some request to the Sheridans and then got into their car.

"A friendly little conference? They might have asked me to join them!" he muttered bitterly.

A taxi drove up, but Max surrendered it to Rushforth and Miss Colthurst. What was Auriol saying to Sheridan, he to her? There was a clear challenge, clearly accepted. Nicias had addressed himself to Cleon; and Cleon had answered Nicias. What next? When Orpington resigned, Sheridan would be offered his place or another: would he take it? He had said he would not, but he might be bluffing: anything to postpone the invitation and to keep old "Blue Peter" in office till the divorce had been forgotten. And "Blue Peter" refused to be bluffed: he did not care who succeeded him, he was not interested in the demands and complications of Sheridan's private life. He had considered everything and argued everything; he had now only to publish his resignation and to surrender his seals.

"Sheridan must choose between the cabinet and her," Max whispered.

Hardly knowing that he had left the Houses of Parliament, he found himself walking towards Cleveland Row. If Auriol came to him at all, she would come now because she had failed to get what she wanted and he was the next best thing. For a long time, indeed, perhaps all her life, she would think of this act of fate which had intervened at the last moment; she would always be wondering what her life would have been if she had married Sheridan.

"That doesn't *matter!*" Max cried.

Nothing mattered so long as he could get her for his own.

With a sudden feeling of helplessness, he recalled her expression as she watched Sheridan speaking. It was the adoration of the child for the hero; her eyes were full of tears; and she gripped the table for support. So long as he fascinated her, she did not ask herself whether she was in love with him, he was too much the god for her to think of him as a man.

Max paused at the top of the Duke of York's steps and then turned sharply to the left. A car was drawn up outside Sheridan's door; and he thought wildly of waiting till she came out and of making a last appeal. Then he retraced his steps and strode up St. James' Street. Auriol would do what Sheridan told her to do; and he would rap out his orders to her, as he now rapped them out to his wife, the moment he had decided how to squeeze the last ounce for himself out of this, as out of every, position.

" He'll take office," Max told himself. "After all, the case can't come on for some months ; and he'll hope to dig himself in by then. He can't marry again for twelve months ; and perhaps he'll persuade Auriol that, if they can wait twelve months, they can wait twenty-four. But, good God, if she can wait two years, she can't be much in love with him ! Why should she marry him at all ? Hold on to that twelve months ! "

In twelve months she must surely come to her senses. Before the year was out, she would say frankly that she had been mistaken.

On his table Max found a reminder from Mr. Caldwell, lying beside the open *Who's Who*. For two hours he had almost forgotten their meeting, though he had intended to tell Geoffrey Mallock of the fight in the train. The sight of the card brought to an end his dream of an eleventh-hour miracle.

" I'm not going to hang about here for two years," he decided, " to be told at the end that there's no change anywhere. The moment I can start and the farther I can go . . . If she wants me, she can always find me." He poured himself out a generous measure of whiskey and promptly returned it to the decanter. " I've drunk quite enough already," he informed himself. " I shall start trainin' now. There's nothin' to train for, but I'll make Caldwell sit up. If this had come a year ago . . . ' You've disappointed me sadly, Max '," he quoted in cruel mimicry of Auriol. " I daresay I have, my dear, but I swear I've played the game better than you and that swine Sheridan. If I ever meet *him* in a rough house, he won't get off with a broken jaw. As your mamma says, life's a great muddle. Life's a bloody, bloody, bloody *mess!*" he shouted, hurling the telephone across the room.

Then he put on his coat again and returned to Cleveland Row. The car was still standing there. A light was burning in the hall; and from time to time a shadow was thrown on the glass panels of the door. He fancied that he could hear voices. Then he became conscious that the chauffeur was eyeing him askance. He turned away and sat down on a step out of sight.

II

INSIDE the house, Auriol was engaged in a triangular duel, in which she fought with Sheridan while he fought with his wife.

"I oughtn't to be here! You must try to forgive me, Mrs. Sheridan. We *must* clear this up, though, all three of us. What did Lord Orpington mean? And what did *you* mean, Ambrose?"

"I meant what I said," Sheridan answered. "I always do. I can't undertake to explain what other people mean, unless they mean what they say."

The brusque reply, Sheridan observed with satisfaction, made Auriol wince, teaching her perhaps that she took a risk in confronting him with a question which he was not ready to answer; confronting him with it in his own house, under the eyes of his wife.

"But what are you going to do?" the girl persisted; and he discovered, as he was always discovering now, that the freaks of her breeding and training had given her a spirit of independence that could not be ignored in matters which affected them both. If Laura had asserted a right to be present when he was considering what was best for her, he would have known at once what to do. "We shan't do any good by burying our heads in the sand."

"There's no reason why we should all stand," said

Laura, wearily loosening her heavy cloak "Won't you go in?"

As Auriol hesitated between two closed doors, she hurried forward and turned on the lights in the library. Sheridan fidgeted with the letters on the hall-table in an attempt to master his exasperation. More vividly than the bitterest reproach could express, Laura was revealing her emotions in utter unconcern whether they embarrassed him or not: she was forgetting, that quick motion said, that the girl had never been to the house before; she was realizing, a moment later, when Auriol accepted a glass of lemonade, that her long struggle was hopeless. Why would she not put it into words? "*Night after night, when I'm safely out of the way, you two will drive back from dinner, discussing your party. While he lights his last cigar, you'll mix him a drink. Perhaps, when she's very tired, you'll bend smilingly over her chair and gather her into your arms . . .*" Why did she not taunt him with having shewn the same tenderness to her in the far-off days when a dinner-party was an event and their first car an adventure?

"I confess I don't know what we're supposed to be discussing," said Sheridan.

The measured calm of his voice shewed Laura that he was furious; and he could see her resolving that, if it were her last service, she must control his fury for him and put into words what this girl, with all her appearance of courage, was afraid to express.

"Lord Orpington seemed to hint that he was resigning immediately," she prompted, "and that you . . ."

"Thank you, I heard his speech," Sheridan answered coldly.

"I think," Laura continued desperately, "Auriol wants to be quite sure that you really mean to throw away . . ."

"Is that it?" Sheridan interrupted. He was tempted to say: "*She's quite capable of speaking for herself*"; but he did not want to unite these women against him. Auriol was plainly gratified when Laura used her Christian name. "Is that it, Auriol?"

"Yes." Auriol rose from her place on the arm of a chair and stood erect. "If you mean that, I shan't let you."

"What will you do?"

"I don't know. I shall go away, I suppose: end things somehow."

"I'm glad—for *your* sake—it's all so simple."

The girl had winced before; now she writhed, helpless in the face of his massive calm and devastating fluency:

"Ah, don't be cruel! I've suffered enough already without being taunted . . . Simple! You call it simple . . ."

"If we're going to discuss this at all," Sheridan interrupted, "we must discuss it quietly. I've been told, till I'm sick of hearing it, that I can't take office one day and appear in the divorce-court the next. The prime minister must have heard there was something in the wind: he went out of his way on Monday to say what a pity it was young Doyle had dished himself. I didn't pay much attention, because I wasn't expecting to be offered anything. Till Orpington went back on all he'd promised, I thought I'd smoothed him down. To-night, when he spoke, I had to make up my mind immediately. I decided that, if I were offered a place in the government, I must refuse it for the present. I told Orpington so, without troubling to give him my reasons. I didn't trouble to congratulate him—or your father, Auriol!—on their pretty little plot. I thought we'd see who would laugh last. However . . . It's not the first time we've discussed this. You agreed . . ."

"There was no talk then of your being offered the C.O."

"We all knew I should be invited to come in the moment they felt they couldn't keep me out any longer. If it's a question of waiting . . ."

He looked at his watch and picked up Auriol's cloak.

"But it's more than that!" Laura interposed. "This chance may never come again. You're giving your enemies a weapon that they'll use against you whenever you try to raise your head. It's your career . . ."

"I've made my choice."

Even to his own hearing, the words and tone were melodramatic, but in no other form could he convey to Auriol that he set her higher than any ambition. She refused to be flattered; and, with the two of them waiting to pick holes in his logic, he could not whisper to one that he would throw away his career to marry her, boasting to the other that he could marry and divorce at will without jeopardizing his career.

"You talk as if you were a nobody!" Auriol exclaimed. "As if a week more or less . . . It's not just one office or another: it's all the work you've done, all the work you're going to do. We have a right to that. I'm not going to let you throw everything away. If you're offered a seat in the cabinet . . ."

"I honestly had no idea you were so much dazzled . . ." Sheridan sighed.

He was still grasping her cloak; and Auriol took it from him as her only means of escaping with dignity.

"You must be careful," she warned him. "We don't want to say things we shall regret. You know I don't mind being attacked, but, if people called me your evil genius and I knew it was true, if our love turned you aside by one hair's-breadth from what you would have done if we'd never met . . ."

"It's my work you're thinking of, not me."

"You're *one!* It's your life!"

"She's quite right, Ambrose."

The unexpected, quiet voice robbed Sheridan of speech

What he had feared was happening: these women were uniting against him.

"Unless you *promise* me, it will be good-bye," Auriol warned him. "If I were responsible for destroying your work . . ."

"You would be. On the day you said good-bye to me, I should say good-bye to the House of Commons, public life, England . . ."

"That's not true!"

A voice, wearily authoritative with knowledge, intervened once more:

"I'm afraid it is, Auriol. I know him."

Sheridan accepted the second interruption as indifferently as the first. If Auriol had not contrived this fantastic triangle, he would have swept her off her feet: literally and figuratively, crushing her in his arms and firing her cool blood with something of his own passion. He could not touch her, he could not move her by ardour of language while the three of them stood there, dissecting his emotions and character.

"That . . . that would be simply wicked," said Auriol.

"Don't let's say anything we may regret," he mocked.

"It would be . . . childish," she added disdainfully.

Sheridan shrugged his shoulders tolerantly:

"I wonder if you'll say that in a few years' time," he mused. "I wonder if you won't rather say that you're speaking now like a child who doesn't know the things that move men in this world. We . . . Good God, I put it to the test when all this trouble began. I couldn't think! I couldn't sleep! I went away for six months and never exchanged a word with you!" His voice, after its brief vehemence, became artificially tranquil again. "Then, suddenly, I found I could work again. I felt you were by my side. This ridiculous test had broken down. Childish . . . It means nothing to you that people commit crimes or set the world on fire for a man or woman . . . I say it will be good-bye to everything, because I need you, because I can't work without you. I knew that to-night when I answered Orpington."

III

DEEP silence crept through the library; and Sheridan watched like a winning chess-player as Auriol fidgeted with her pieces in futile efforts to escape. It was absurd for her to say she would not take the responsibility of this or that! If he refused office, he would refuse it on account of her. If she disappeared from his life, he would still abandon his work because of her. If he accepted office, if he went on with his work, it would be at her bidding; and through her, later, he would resign his office and forsake his work simultaneously, if indeed old Standish succeeded in getting his way. She was responsible for whatever happened to the three of them, though the experience and wisdom of twice her age were graven into his own buffeted features and into the careworn face of the woman beside her.

As though hardly conscious that she was moving, Auriol crouched by Laura's chair and began nervously to twist rings that hung loose on shrunken fingers.

"*Do* tell me what I ought to do!" she whispered.

"I *can't*!" Laura's hand rested for a moment on the rippling waves of chestnut hair by her side. "I'm so tired I can't think properly."

A second silence followed, to be broken this time by Sheridan:

"You must excuse me, Auriol: I have work to finish. The car's waiting when you want it. . . . So far as I'm concerned, everything stands where it stood three hours ago . . ."

"You'll refuse?" asked Laura. "You'll let yourself be trapped by people you despise? Mr. Standish, Lord Orpington, Sir John Ferrers, Mr. Rodney . . ."

"If I accept—God in heaven, I've not been *offered* anything yet!—I'm playing your father's game, Auriol. *Won't* he be pleased? The first to congratulate me!"

Auriol winced again, this time at the vulgarity of his tone.

"Suppose we leave daddy out of it?" she suggested. "This is between you and me. If you think you're big enough to get back where Parnell and Dilke failed . . ."

"Thirty years ago! D'you think *I* shall fail?" Auriol shivered and looked away. "Very well, then! I've committed myself pretty deeply to-night, but no doubt I can find a formula. I shan't be playing Standish's game," he assured his wife; "nor your father's," he promised Auriol. "Whatever I'm offered I'll take! Orpington's challenged me. I take up his challenge. '*What if Cleon should deliver the goods?*' If I'm put in his place, Orpington will have a chance of seeing what I should do in his place. And, once there, I stay there till I'm dismissed!"

As the door closed with a slam, the two women looked at each other.

"He's like that when he thinks any one is defying him," Laura sighed. "I suppose, if you *died*, he'd come back to his work . . . in time; some one else would 'inspire' him. My dear, my dear, that's the most dreadful thing of all!" she added in a whisper. "This won't last! . . . And he's the only thing in life I care for. . . . You're going?"

"There's nothing more to say, is there?" asked Auriol. "I shall feel I've ruined him whatever I do. Why won't he let things slide for a bit?"

"Because it's against his nature. If he hadn't always wanted things so badly, he would never have forced his way to where he is."

As Auriol got into the car, Sheridan watched her from the window of his work-room. As the car turned towards Pall Mall, he saw a young man in opera-hat and coat breaking into a sudden run and then suddenly stopping. Downstairs he heard the chain of the front-door being hooked into place.

Though he pretended that he had to work, he only wanted to think. A formula to explain away his hasty refusal of preferment that had not been offered him . . . A calm, critical review of that evening's engagements: Orpington, Laura, young Hendry, Auriol, Tony . . . Hendry could be dismissed from mind if in fact he was behaving like the hero of a romance and carrying his broken heart to the other side of the world. Tony could be dismissed, too: there had been some talk of his wanting to argue things out again, but, if appearances were to be believed, Tony's spare time would now be amply occupied by Evelyn. They must be nearing her hotel now, if they had not reached it; their taxi was on the right road and only required a gentle push from behind. Auriol? Laura? Orpington?

"Orpington will find his bluff has been called," Sheridan told himself.

On his way upstairs to bed, he found his wife's door standing open. Seeing a shadow moving fantastically up and down the walls, he went in to apologize for Auriol's forced entry.

"She's young enough to be a little thoughtless still," said Laura without rancour. "It *did* hurt rather; but I think the modern intellectual young woman feels bound in honour to be very direct. I notice the young critics always make fun of you if you write that some dear one has 'passed away'—a beautiful phrase, I always think—: they like to say boldly that people 'die'. Auriol has a lot to learn, Ambrose, and she'll be rather an obstinate pupil."

Sheridan's eyes fell; and he played with the brushes on the dressing-table.

"I can't discuss her with you or you with her," he blustered. "The position is painful enough already . . ."

"I was trying to help you," she broke in gently. "Ambrose, you once thought highly of my judgement. May I warn you of two things ?"

"What are they ?"

Before answering Laura shut the door and pushed an armchair into the circle of light by her dressing-table. Sitting down, she motioned to him so that he turned and left his own face in shadow, while the lamp over his head revealed every change of expression on the face opposite him. It was in this way, as both knew, that he liked to stage an interview when he doubted the good faith of his antagonist.

You've promised to take anything that's offered you," she began, "so we needn't discuss that; but there must be no scandal . . ."

"If you'll shew me how it can be avoided . . ."

There was a gentle sigh, followed by a long pause. The arm-chair moved slightly so that half the sitter's face fell into darkness; the other half was shaded by a hand.

"You can divorce me," she volunteered.

Sheridan started; and a hat-whisk clattered to the floor.

"Absurd!" he muttered. "You, of all women on earth . . ."

"I know I've given you no technical grounds. You must pay some one to lend his name; and I shan't defend the suit. After all, it's what a great many men have done, quite innocent men, when their wives wanted a divorce." Instinctive enmity, for twenty years repressed, bubbled to the surface. "I'm sure Mr. Livingstone will be able to arrange things."

The hat-whisk was retrieved; and Sheridan stood up with a gesture of dismissal, forgetting characteristically that he was trying to dismiss her from her own room.

" And who d'you think would believe it ? "

" The fewer the better, so long as the judge is one of them. It will be a surprise, but when I don't defend the suit . . ."

" And what would you think of me ? "

" For doing this ? It's the only possible way, I shall be glad you've been sensible enough to take it."

" Sensible ? My God, Laura, you must despise me pretty well to suggest a thing like that."

If she had not feared to lose her small remaining self-control, Laura would have betrayed her impatience at his obtuseness or insincerity. Those who talked most of "facing facts", those who described themselves most persistently as " realists " were the most incorrigibly sentimental when facts had to be faced. If she had to lose him, did it matter *how* she lost him ?

" Despise ? . . . No ! I . . . just love you."

IV

LOOKING up, she found him taking stock of her and felt suddenly ashamed.

Yes, she was two years older than he was ; and she looked it. Yes, her face was lined and her neck thin. Though her hair retained its colour, it was dead by contrast with Auriol's chestnut glow. Her eyes were always tired, her hands always cold. She was no longer a woman to inspire passion.

" Love . . ." he muttered.

Laura bowed her head slowly. If they had ever had children, he might have learned that love transcended the physical lure of one sex for another. When he had outgrown his animal pains and hungers, he would know all that she knew now.

" And whether I dishonour myself ? " he demanded.

Had she cared to punish him, here was a rare chance to ask whether he minded dishonouring himself or was only afraid of being caught in dishonour! There was nothing dishonourable, apparently, in seducing poor, empty-headed little clerks and shop-girls, in bringing them to his wife's house or in pensioning them off, with their families. There was nothing dishonourable in living with one woman when he was married to another and pledged to a third. Men, he was fond of saying, were different from women; one man was not the same as another. It was best to leave it at that.

"If there's any dishonouring, that's been done already," she answered. "I don't know. When I was Auriol's age, I should have said that husbands and wives were dishonoured once and for all when they broke their vows. Now that I've seen the difficulties of marriage, I'm not sure that these vows don't force people to be dishonourable. . . . My dear, if I divorced you so that you could marry Auriol, you would have to find a co-respondent. . . . This is all so unimportant. If I *have* to lose you . . . and when this really *is* the only way . . It's the last thing I can do for you."

"I can't accept it."

"It's the last thing I shall ever ask you to do for me. Will you refuse me that? Can you? Dare you, Ambrose? I *won't* let you ruin yourself! You had all my love; and I've given myself, my life, my happiness—yes, I've never said it to you before, but I'll say it now!—I gave up my hope of children to bring you where you are. God knows, God knows I don't grudge it! I'd give it all again and more if I had it to give, but I won't let you throw it away for a scruple you don't feel. And you don't! You're afraid of what people would say if they knew. Well, they won't know. If you were afraid of being dishonourable, you wouldn't throw me aside for Auriol Otway. Why, I'm giving you this of my own free will! For my own sake as much as yours! All that I was, all that I had went to make you what you are. I won't let you break what I helped to build. What else have you left me? When you've gone away . . .'

"Laura!"

Coming at her like the roar of a gun, his voice stemmed the rush of her words and broke down her desperate valour.

"I'm sorry," she answered meekly.

"You're becoming hysterical. It's time you went to bed."

"I can't go till you say what you're going to do." A last, unexpected shot came to hand; and she fired it before he could stalk out of the room. "You must do this in my way, Ambrose," she told him. "If you don't . . . If you don't, I shan't help you. I know I promised not to stand in your way, but I shall break my promise. I shall keep you tied to me. You must say what you're going to do!"

"I'm going to bed. You should know me well enough by now, Laura, to know that I never allow myself to be stampeded. It was a mistake to start this discussion. Whether you divorce me or I divorce you . . ."

The sentence was left unfinished, as Laura covered her face and burst into tears. When he admitted the possibility of divorcing her, she knew that she had won

"I'm sorry," she apologized again.

"You're worn out. You'd much better try to get some sleep."

Laura shook her head. Whatever his next step, he was unlikely to waste time over it; and, whether she left the house in a day or a month, this was probably the last time that they would be alone in her room; grotesquely intimate and fantastically remote, she in a dressing-gown and he in a wadded smoking-jacket; within touching distance of one another; discussing the most comfortable means of getting a divorce, as they had discussed before now the most convenient way of getting to Scotland.

He was still fidgeting with the hat-whisk; and, as she looked up, his eyes were wandering from her brushes to the dressing-table, from that to the rest of the furniture, from the furniture to the curtains and the silk-brocaded panelling. Was he wondering how Auriol would like the room?

"You'd be wiser to go to bed," he told her, "but if you want to talk . . . We shall have to decide about this house. It's yours, if you wish to live here . . ."

"I've not thought what I'm going to do," she answered.

"Think it over at your leisure."

He stood up to go and seemed suddenly to lose control of himself. Angry phrases and broken sentences tripped over one another. It was ridiculous, monstrous! No one would believe such a story! She must be mad to suggest it! Would she kindly use her imagination and fancy the kind of discussion that would spring up when it was rumoured that he was divorcing her? Take the Otways, who knew all that was to be known. Take Tony. Take any one. . . .

"People believe what they want to believe," she answered wearily. "It'll be much pleasanter for every one if you have nothing to live down. You matter; and I don't. If you can go into court with clean hands, so much the better for the Otways and every one. I can't argue about it, Ambrose. Those are my terms. You must make up what story you like. You can let people think that I was to blame all through and you were shielding me. It's so little! . . . And I shan't hear what people say." . . .

"What do you propose to do?"

"Go abroad, I suppose. I really can't say, Ambrose: I haven't had time to think. I'm rather old to be beginning a new life . . . by myself."

Her voice of despair reproached him.

"It would have been easier if we'd faced facts long ago," he answered. " If you'd divorced me when I asked you first, you would have made a very different life for yourself. Even now . . "

" What life can I make for myself now ? "

" Even now you'll find the change easier to bear if you remind yourself that, to all intents and purposes, it took place ten years ago. After all, there *are* other interests in the world besides . . ." He hesitated for a word and ejected it contemptuously, " besides *domesticity*. If you set yourself to find them, why, in two, three years' time . . ."

" In three years' time ? " she repeated vaguely.

V

HER mind went back to Auriol's entrance that night. In three years' time would she be standing in this room ? They would have been married two years by then, Ambrose would be two years older ; and Auriol would not have begun to grow older in two years' time or ten. How would they get on together ? How *could* they ?

In two years' time or three, Ambrose would still be less than forty-five, with thirty years of activity ahead of him if he curbed his appetites. Could Auriol teach him temperance in eating and drinking ? Could she persuade him that his passion for work was a more insidious vice than either ? Forty-five ; and one of the leaders of his party in office or opposition. Forty-five ; and a secretary of state. Forty-five ; a peer, if he was still fascinated by titles. Forty-five ; and a young man still, with a prestige not confined to one country. Within three years certain others—the prime minister, perhaps, among them—would have yielded to his pressure as Lord Orpington had yielded that night.

Auriol, in three years, would have learned many lessons. She had many to learn, many disillusionments to face. By then she might have fashioned some consoling formula to justify her husband : a man of genius was not as other men. She might have discovered that Ambrose Sheridan's wife must have enough personality to inspire him but that her personality must never conflict with his. She might have acquired miraculous patience and self-effacement. If she were fortunate, she would by then have a baby or two and a life of her own in looking after them.

" In two or three years' time . . ." Laura echoed.

If she stayed away for three years, the gap which she had left for a moment would be filled. Some one else would take her place on all the committees ; Auriol would sign the cheques for the hospitals. In three years' time Tony, profiting by his late scare, would have married advantageously : some one with a handle to her name or some one with money at the bank or even some one with both. Max Hendry would have returned from his wanderings. . . .

If Max were wise, he would not be in any hurry to return. And, when he came back, he would be wise to give Auriol a wide berth. In two or three years' time she might have outgrown her present infatuation. When she realized the difference in their ages, perhaps she would see that Ambrose, with everything else, had annexed her youth. Perhaps she would try to recapture it.

" I said there were two warnings I wanted to give you," recalled Laura. " How shall I . . . ? You're on a pedestal at present. Take care never to come off it."

" Pedestal ? " he echoed contemptuously and went on with what he had been saying.

He was talking, Laura found, about her living abroad, but she discovered of a sudden that she must not live too far away. Since this disastrous marriage could not be prevented, it must be made stable. Auriol had promised to come for advice and help ; she would need both on the day when she discovered that she was not in love with her husband or with his life. For a time, no doubt, she would be dazzled by her position ; then she would come to want the society of her contemporaries ; and Ambrose would soon lose patience with them and their silliness. As he grew older, the young men would hint to Auriol that she was not appreciated ; if he went in search of new " inspiration", they would encourage her to console herself.

" She's so very young . . ." Laura persisted.

" In two or three years' time . . ." Sheridan began confidently.

They had both used the phrase ; and for him it had lost its definite meaning. To her dismay Laura found herself estimating that three years, more probably two, was the utmost time that she could give for this marriage to run smoothly. Auriol, with her inhibitions of birth and tradition, was not going to run away ; Ambrose, with his political complex confusing his private life, would keep up appearances, but in less than two years they would both see their mistake. He would first shock her modesty with his animalism, then he would outrage her mental chastity with some piece of sharp practice or vindictiveness. And sooner or later she would discover that he was twenty years older, that she had never been in love with him.

Try as she might, Laura could not shut out a picture—" in two or three years' time "—of Auriol and Max Hendry, drawn together by old love and proximity of age and similarity of breeding. They were of one world and generation ; Ambrose was of another.

" In two or three years' time . . ." he was saying again.

Laura walked to the window and drew the curtains aside. There was a light in the Clock Tower : the House was still sitting. There were lights along the Mall ; there was a blaze of light from Buckingham Palace. If this were her last night in that room, this would be her last memory. The lights would still be shining when she was at the other end of the world and when Auriol was in her place. They would shine in her brain.

Even when she closed her eyes, they continued to shine. She wished she could get rid of them. And she wished she could get rid of the uneasy forebodings that gathered about the day when Auriol should awake, in mind and body, to see herself. Would she then set out to find the romance of which she was now being cheated? If Max came back . . .

"In three years' time anything may happen," she sighed.

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